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MAISONS DE PRESSE, MAISONS DE PASSE:
PROSTITUTION IN THE PARISIAN LITERARY MARKET, 1830 - 1923

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century French novels are replete with prostitutes. These fictionalized versions of Paris' real population of venal women and men usually possess an exceptional spirit; yet over the course of the narrative, they are consistently removed from public circulation in society. Literary critics such as Charles Bernheimer have adeptly shown that a desire for narrative control over the prostitute reveals a prevailing anxiety surrounding gender—and more specifically, female sexuality—in nineteenth-century France. My work demonstrates that this anxiety also has a material component, one that was both specific to, and endangered, the evolving Parisian literary marketplace. Furthermore, I show that the evolution in depictions of prostitution indicates that the threat came not only from women, but from another non-dominant group that benefited from education reform and a wider availability of reading material: the working class.

In this dissertation, I analyse prefaces to slang dictionaries and scenes in novels in which venal characters read and/or write: moments where the prostitute as subject collapses into metaphor. I use these as an interpretive lens for understanding how authors from Balzac to Proust might turn to an illicit subject to further their careers. I argue that depictions of reading and writing prostitutes make the venal body an effective, but perilous, site for the production of new ideas about the professional writer. Effective, in that the ideas the novels supported continue to echo in current Western notions of genius, intellectual property and labor, and creative license. Yet perilous in that, as an image of intellectual venality, the literate prostitute risks mapping the venal body—sexed, gendered, and working class—back onto either the figure of the idealized author, or his body of work. At stake in this dissertation is a way of representing prostitution that contributed to the gendering of not only the professional author, but the public intellectual.

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INTRODUCTION : READING THE “PUTAIN DE LIVRE”

“Notre siècle est un siècle de putains, et ce qu’il y a de moins prostitué, jusqu’à présent, ce sont les prostituées.”

—*Gustave Flaubert, writing to Louise Colet, January 29 1854*

In January 2015, photos of an anonymously hacked electronic traffic panel in Los Angeles went viral. FranceInfo radio personality Guy Birenbaum picked up on it, saying “Réussir à pirater la signalisation publique pour faire passer des [sic] beaux messages à tous de manière anonyme c’est une opportunité géniale, un fantasme.”¹ The “beau message” in question? “Lisez un putain de livre. [Read a fucking book.]” In many ways, this dissertation is about “hacking” the media that serve to regulate public circulation.² It is about a small group of people trying to shape what those around them read, and how. And it is about reading the “putain de livre,” as the full plasticity of this phrase allows: reading books that juxtapose vulgarity and literature, books viewed derisively, books that defy such derision, books compared to *putains* in the public nature of their commercial circulation and desirability; and, of course, reading the *putains de livres* themselves: the “paper prostitutes” that are as much products of a larger literary tradition as they are the titillating subjects of individually-sold books.³ Since the era that gave

¹ No one has taken credit for hacking into the wireless network that allowed an L.A. city traffic sign to display the message, “Read a fucking book” on January 9, 2015. ActuaLitté documented the viral circulation and FranceInfo Journalist Guy Birenbaum commented on it on his radio show Jan. 13, 2015. <http://www.franceinfo.fr/emission/l-autre-info/2014-2015/lisez-un-putain-de-livre-14-01-2015-04-35>

² “hacker (n.): 1. A person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users, who prefer to learn only the minimum necessary. RFC1392, the *Internet Users’ Glossary*, usefully amplifies this as: A person who delights in having an intimate understanding of the internal workings of a system, computers and computer networks in particular.” *The on-line hacker Jargon File*, version 4.4.7, 20 Nov, 2015. <http://www.catb.org/jargon/html/H/hacker.html>

³ I have borrowed the term “paper prostitute” from Mireille Dottin-Orsini and Daniel Grojnowski’s excellent “Préface” to the anthology *Un Joli monde, romans de la prostitution*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 2008, p. xxxv. They

rise to the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), it has been understood that the act of reading "a fucking book" (with the expletive serving as both adjective and noun) can have political, cultural and artistic implications. In short, what I am concerned with here is the conscious association of prostitution with the vulgar in order to direct the flow of literary traffic.

Prostitué(e), etymologically, denotes someone exposed indiscriminately in public.

Adapted into French from the Latin verb *prostituere*—composed of *pro-* (before) and *statuere* (to place)—it means, literally, placed in front.⁴ Figuratively, it implies a degrading public exposure of a sexually-available body: the most intimate self, stripped of its agency.⁵ As the past participle of a verb, it has long been used to describe dishonored male writers; as a noun, however, it is primarily associated with women of loose morals.⁶ In the above citation, nineteenth-century novelist Gustave Flaubert calls on this lexical ambiguity of being *prostitué(e)* to conclude an extended commentary about the subjugation of the modern author to the buying power of the tasteless bourgeoisie in the increasingly democratic literary market. Flaubert's choice to collapse the *prostitué(e)* with the vulgar—but more precise—term *putain* serves to powerfully convey his disgust for a society in which the circulation of money had seemed to reduce formerly artistic practices to common labor. For the author of *Madame Bovary*, the figure

remind their reader that, for all an author may claim to depict an objective reality, the "putains de papier" are, in the end, part of an intertextual, illusory world distinct from that of real prostituted men and women in Paris.

⁴ "Prostituer," *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*, CNRS, 2004. www.atilf.fr Accessed Nov. 15, 2015.

⁵ Because such exposure is inherently imposed by external forces, the word has meant "expose[d] to shame" and "put to improper sexual/unworthy use" since long before its appearance in French. "Prostituere," *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1982.

⁶ Comparing "Prostituer" and "Prostitué, -ée," in the *Trésor de la langue française informatisé* (op. cit.) yields this paradox: as a noun, the word *prostitué* (*substantif, masculin*) is defined below *prostituée*, and the first two definitions focus on sexuality: a libertine, a homosexual male prostitute, and "3. *Rare*. Écrivain qui met son talent au service des passions, des intérêts, qui renonce sa liberté d'expression." And yet under the entry for the verb *prostituier*, the very first definition is the figurative one: "A.—1. Déshonorer, déprécier quelque chose par l'usage indigne ou intéressé que l'on en fait. *Prostituer son nom, son image, son talent, sa plume...*" While the italicized illustrative sentence is taken from an 1835 text, the historical portion of the entry gives an example from 1666 to situate the use of the word "parlant d'un écrivain."

of the *putain* functions as shorthand for the shift to a modern capitalist exchange economy, which created a systemic venality and reduced everything to a commodity to be desired, purchased and consumed. Evoking the modern prostitute allows him to communicate the idea that writers pressured to make their art conform to the desires of a paying public suffer a degradation worse than that experienced by women who sell their bodies in brothels.

Considerable differences exist between the kind of prostitution that Flaubert was familiar with and sex work as it exists in twenty-first century American culture, as well as between the publishing industry that arose in nineteenth-century Paris and the ability to continually publish that defines the era of Web 2.0. And yet this particular metaphor—comparing public intellectuals to sex workers—has continued to resonate with male writers who feel that their work is undervalued.⁷ Not only is such rhetoric dismissive of the real problems posed by the contemporary sex trade; it also continues to feminize a certain kind of intellectual work; in the case of digital publishing, writing considered as too dependent on dialogue with its public is dismissed as feminine in style and domestic in content.⁸

In this dissertation, I therefore seek to interrogate the range of meanings expressed through the metaphor of the prostitute as a reader and/or writer through its evolution over the long nineteenth century in France, and to examine its role in the production of the modern ideologies that perpetuate gender and class hegemonies, ideologies that shaped literary

⁷ For example, economist Bruno Frey uses prostitution as a metaphor for personal degradation in order to reflect on the loss of intellectual integrity suffered by those wishing to be published in academic journals: “Publishing as prostitution? – Choosing between one’s own ideas and academic success,” *Public Choice* 116 (2003): 205–223. He, at least, acknowledges the reality of his referent, citing other economists on prostitution as a form of paid labor. In an opinion piece published in *Forbes*’ online edition, another writer simply refers, off-handedly, to universities as prostitutes who are willing to “trade their principles for cash.” Richard Vedder, “Academic Prostitution, California Style,” *Forbes.com*, July 6, 2015.

⁸ Stylistic and content analysis suggest that women writers tend to use blogs to interact with a virtual community, while men use blogs as a public platform for making authoritative statements. For more in the relationship between blogging and gender, see Shirley Booth, *Gender Issues in Learning and Working with Information Technology: Social Constructs and Cultural Contexts: Social Constructs and Cultural Contexts*, Hershey: Information Science Reference, 2010, p. 239.

production through the twentieth century and continue even today. I argue that representations of prostitutes helped authors articulate (and normalize) new definitions of professional writing in the evolving capitalist literary market between 1830 and 1925. I trace an evolution over the course of the century by highlighting various shifts in ideologies related to prostitution as well as to literary production and consumption. I then ultimately conclude that analysing these representations of prostitutes and others of the time period continues to matter because we cannot fully understand the dominant figure of the professional, literary intellectual today unless we examine the history of the gendering of circulation on the literary market to which, I believe, these narratives of prostitution contributed.

Methodology: Defining Literary Prostitution

Today, while globalization and the digital revolution has rendered the notion of a sexual body's "public" exposure harder to pin down, and if the question of a prostitute's agency remains highly fraught, the link between prostitution and the exchange of capital is unwavering. A pair of twenty-first century economists defined prostitution primarily by its economic arrangement: "the act of rendering, from *the client's* point of view, non-reproductive sex against payment."⁹ Their definition is careful to avoid attributing sexual characteristics to either client or prostitute. Yet, as the authors' discussion reveals, the economic value of non-reproductive sex depends largely on the social position of the publicly-available body, a position defined by the intersection of gender and class. This was true throughout the nineteenth century as well.

Nineteenth-century French works of fiction and non-fiction are replete with prostitutes. Most of these works identify Paris as the cultural center from which radiated the policies as well

⁹ Lena Edlund and Evelyn Korn, "A theory of prostitution," *Journal of Political Economy* Vol. 110 (February 2002), p. 183

as the stereotypes concerning the individuals for whom sex was a form of capital. The textual versions of Paris' real population of venal women and men often seem the object of the authors' admiration or pity; yet over the course of the works' narrative, they are consistently removed from public circulation. The literary corpus I have chosen for my study demonstrates the range in class and character of the prostituted figures in the public imagination. A *grisette* and a *courtisane* play key roles in Honoré de Balzac's *Illusions perdues* (1837) and *Splendeurs et Misères des courtisanes* (1843); Alexandre Dumas *fils* offers a fictionalized account of a real *courtisane* in *La Dame aux camellias* (1848); true to the Naturalist trends, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Edmond de Goncourt depict grittier working-class women in *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* (1876) and *La Fille Elisa* (1877); and finally, Marcel Proust portrays a bi-sexual male prostitute who is both expensively kept and also paid by the night in *A La recherche du temps perdu* (1923). This collection also offers my reader a sense of the lasting power of prostitution as a subject of literary fascination over the course of what is commonly called the long nineteenth century.¹⁰

Studying these examples allows me to trace not only the evolution of the face of prostitution, but also that of the role of the professional writer. The metaphorical relationship between the two exceeds the purely literary sphere, which I show in my reading of the prefaces to a number of slang dictionaries published during the same period. My study begins in the 1830s, with the first generation of writers for whom "living by the pen" was a truly bourgeois

¹⁰ Admittedly, such a diverse corpus risks offering a lens too widely-focused to reveal much in detail about the intersection of gender and capitalism. In their introduction to *Un Joli Monde. Romans de la prostitution* (op. cit.), Mireille Dottin-Orsini and Daniel Grojnowski limit their definition of *romans de la prostitution* to realist representations of working-class women who exchange sex directly for money. "Note sur la présente édition," p. LVII. If I have opted for a broader definition of prostitution than theirs, it is because my focus is, as I explain above, the use of the prostitute as a metaphor for the professional writer, which, I find, productively unifies a more stylistically-diverse set of texts.

profession.¹¹ The works selected illustrate transitional periods between the broader movements that traditionally divide the century of literary history that follows: the transition from Romanticism to Realism, then the move from Realism toward Naturalism and Decadence, and finally the shift toward Modernism around the First World War.

A quarter of a century has passed since Charles Bernheimer examined the rhetorical power in depicting public women in *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (1989). He argues that novelists sought to control, through their writing, wide-spread “anxieties” over a heightened awareness of female sexuality. This argument would serve as a foundation for much of the subsequent American scholarship on prostitution in nineteenth-century Paris, including my own. In *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (1994), for example, Janet Beizer shows how such anxieties, mapped onto the sexually available female body, flow between literature and scientific discourses. In another study published the same year as Beizer’s, Jann Matlock brings a feminized practice of reading into the discussion of masculine control in *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (1994). While these sources and others do important work in exposing the extent to which gendered spheres permeated social order, their focus on female subjects as exclusively representative of women begs the questions they pose. The nineteenth-century authors continue to disappear behind their spectacular subjects. Even a more recent study, *Un Nouveau monde amoureux, célibataires et prostituées au XIXe siècle* (2010) by Laure Katsaros, pairing the dandified celibate writer with the sexually transgressive

¹¹ See chapter IV of Max Milner’s study, “Les conditionnements matériels de la production littéraire,” in which he writes, “Les générations parvenant à l’âge adulte en 1820 et en 1830 sont donc les premiers, dans l’histoire des lettres françaises, où tous les écrivains marquants vivent réellement de leur plume (c’est-à-dire, non pas des gratifications ou des pensions, mais du produit de la vente de leurs ouvrages), et cela non par choix et par goût de l’indépendance, comme il arrivait exceptionnellement dans les générations précédentes, mais par suite des contraintes de leur situation sociale et des possibilités nouvelles offertes à la diffusion de la pensée.” *Le Romantisme* vol. I, Paris: Arthaud, 1972, p. 32.

public woman in both the literary and legal imagination, focuses on anxieties related to a departure from reproductive norms.

While such literary criticism does generally dialogue with cultural studies, and does articulate how the subject—the fantasmic woman—relates to political discourses and social constructs, it is time to take some distance from the predominantly psychoanalytic framework characteristic of this period in American literary scholarship, and layer on a more materialist approach to the central question that we keep asking ourselves: why were there so many representations of prostitution in circulation in nineteenth-century French literature?¹²

I propose that something else, something less abstract and less generalized than “female sexual power,” was also at work in the nineteenth-century Parisian imaginary’s conflation of art and sex. In the novels depicting venal women as the subject of an authoritative, objective gaze, various plot devices and/or an emphatic use of an erudite style helps the reader to clearly distinguish between the work’s subject and its author. Yet the fact that many of these novels about prostitutes first appeared serially reminds us that the nineteenth-century novelist can never be entirely distinct from his subjection to the desires of editors, critics and the general public reading his body of work. We hereby see an inextricable, and nuanced, link between the material reality of the literary marketplace—represented by the increasingly powerful *maisons de presse*—and the anxieties over class, sex and commodification associated with the women and men in the socially and legally marginal *maisons de passe*.

Like my predecessors, I began my study in a good faith effort to *chercher la femme*; what I found revealed men. However, I still consider my work more engaged with traditional feminist

¹² Let it not be said that such a move constitutes a radical departure from the approach that made the 1980s and 90s, the golden era of French studies: if I bring a Marxist reading to the figure of the bourgeois reader/consumer that appears at the edges of the works in my corpus, it is as much because T. J. Clark did this for Impressionist painting in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984) as because Jacques Rancière had done in *La Nuit des prolétaires* (1981).

scholarship than with the growing field of masculinity studies. Margeret Waller, in the prologue to her book, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel* (1993), proposes that the feminist movements in both contemporary United States and nineteenth-century France destabilized traditional masculinity in similar ways; in both cultures, some men sought to appropriate attributes of marginalized femininity as an “underhanded means of reempowerment” (3). I believe that identifying with the marginal figure as they narrate, romanticize, justify, but ultimately condemn prostitution falls into this category. As Margaret Cohen has shown in *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (1999), male realist authors engaged in a polemic that sought to distinguish their work from earlier sentimental novels (novels that had made for some successful women writers) by means of a rhetorical strategy of “simultaneous erasure and denigration”.¹³ At the same time, these authors were engaged in less abstract negotiations: as Christine Haynes has shown in *Lost Illusions: The Politics of Publishing in Nineteenth-Century France* (2010), the publishing industry was undergoing political and financial redistribution all century long. As we shall see, many representations of prostitution produce a certain image of the authentic, legitimate writer in opposition to a venal, feminized writer of questionable artistic integrity. Comparing publication to prostitution works (now, as it did then) to restrict the circulation of legitimate, culturally valuable writing within the cultural sphere controlled by dominant bourgeois masculinity.¹⁴ A secondary, but no less important effect is that the ubiquity of such a metaphor helps make writing as a publicly-recognized profession

¹³ p. 78

¹⁴ Technorati used to rank the millions of blogs available on the Internet by “cultural authority”; while the site no longer exists, the final ranking on May 29, 2014 shows that an overwhelming majority of the most linked-to and shared blogs were written (or managed) by men. <http://www.seocial.com/technorati-blog-directory-deleted-may-29/>, accessed Nov. 5, 2015.

(as an author and/or literary critic) seem unappealing, if not downright threatening, to women intellectuals.

Take, for example, Flaubert. In claiming to be prostituted on the literary market, he was, of course, speaking figuratively. Many male authors used prostitution as a metaphor for journalism, art and literary criticism, and other professional writing, the payment for which depended on public interest. This analogy expressed frustration with what they perceived as a degradation of the artist's status in the new bourgeois capitalist system: prostitutes sold their bodies, and writers sold their ideas; prostitutes couldn't choose their clients, and writers—in the new era of daily newspapers—couldn't choose their readers. However, let us imagine, momentarily, that his addressee—Louise Colet, a respected woman poet—had dared to agree, saying (anachronistically) that her editor, too, had completely “whored out” her talent. Due to the gender asymmetry of what Gail Pheterson calls “the whore stigma” in an essay published in *The Prostitution Prism* (1996), Colet's reputation would have been instantly tarnished by the assumption that she was, quite literally, a public woman.¹⁵ Such was, and is, the hidden power of gendered metaphors to naturalize and eternalize ideologies shaping the public sphere.¹⁶

Now, feminist scholars have worked for decades to draw attention to way figurative language helps construct gender and class, and (re)produce problematic social hierarchies, both in general and within particular fields over the course of the century. As Joan Wallach Scott argues in *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (1996), the image of the public authority figure in the ideal French Republic was gradually produced as an abstract

¹⁵ Pheterson defines the “whore stigma” thus: “a social and legal branding of women who are suspected of being or acting like prostitutes [...] Prostitutes epitomize social illegitimacy and are thereby designated fair game for scrutiny and attack.” *The Prostitution Prism*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1996, 30-31.

¹⁶ On the power of metaphor as a social construct, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: U Chicago P, [1980] 2003.

universal individual, which would come to be implicitly understood as a heterosexual male of the ruling class. In a similar vein, Victoria Thompson shows that misogynistic images of prostitutes and saleswomen in the literary and press imaginary helped shape the Parisian commercial economy as a gendered institution in her book *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris, 1830-1879* (2000). Bonnie Smith documents a parallel gendering of the field of history as it was defined over the course of the nineteenth century: in *The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice* (1998), she argues that male historian's classification of the historical writing done by women as "amateurism" defined the professional historian and his work in opposition to women and to domestic life.

It is my goal to address the gendering of the writer as a public and professional figure. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the novel was largely a "feminine" genre: written not only for, but also by women. However, because assuming the family as the base unit risks ignoring to what extent class is implicated in gendering a profession, I also frame my work in light of what Kevin Floyd describes in *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (2009): the interplay between two totalizing narratives under construction in the nineteenth century: heteronormativity and capitalism.¹⁷ In the nineteenth-century Parisian imagination, the figure of the prostitute occupied a place at the intersection of a real market and the circulation of ideologies in the process of being defined in the increasingly democratic, post-Revolutionary state: ideas about gender norms, class boundaries, public and private spheres, labor, capital, cultural production and sexual reproduction. These issues were at the heart of the anxieties that merged—in the authorial mind—the modern *maisons de passe* and the new bourgeois capitalist *maisons de presse*.

¹⁷ Floyd aims to read the gender assumptions that undergird economic theory. I seek to productively invert his approach: to unpack discussions of nineteenth-century gender performance in search of notions of economics, labor and consumer capitalism that undergird the developing ideas of sexual difference.

Gendered metaphors are but a symptom of this broader cultural anxiety, however they do reveal what Jacques Derrida calls, in *Grammatology*, the “subjective affect:” the emotion that is expressed by falsely representing the object that triggered the reaction.¹⁸ Metaphors, he says, convey “a situation of threat, distress, and dereliction,” a fear of the *other*, but they also serve to transform that *other* into something different than itself, something more recognizable.¹⁹ If we apply Derrida’s notion to the trope at hand, and if the prostitute circulates as both subject and metaphor, then the reality of prostitution is important in as much as the threats it poses are discernable. Perhaps it is already obvious that I believe that Flaubert, and the authors whom I will consider at length, were not talking about real *prostitu  (e)s*. Or, at least, not exclusively. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that this study does not—and could not—take up the question of how nineteenth-century fictional representations of prostitutes impacted the lives of the real women (and men) supporting themselves by having sex for money in Flaubert’s time, nor those doing so today. However, that does not mean I am not concerned with how these representations stood to impact the lives of real women and men. What I am asking is how we might better understand, today, how the figure of the modern professional writer—the evolving, and thereby unrecognizable, other in the derridian framework of metaphor—was rendered more recognizable by being transformed into the prostitute.

My approach to unpacking this metaphor is thus necessarily informed by cultural studies, sociology and historical materialism. My work is indebted to scholars of the archive whose analysis of the documented history of prostitution allows me to demonstrate points at which rhetorical tropes operate under the illusion of scientific objectivity. Key studies include Alain

¹⁸ “The Originary Metaphor,” Trans. Gayatri Spivak, reprinted in *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances*, Ed. Julian Wolfreys, Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1998, p. 94.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 95.

Courbin's *Les Filles de noce: Misère sexuelle et prostitution au XIXe siècle* (1978), Jill Harsin's *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (1985), and Régis Revenin's *Homosexualité et prostitution masculines à Paris, 1870-1918* (2005). Also necessarily underlying my readings are works historicizing general artistic production and reception (including that of literature) such as Jacques Rancière's *Le Partage du sensible : Esthétique et politique* (2000) and Pierre Bourdieu's *La Distinction : Critique sociale du jugement*. And finally, I situate my work within the nascent dialogue between literary studies and the History of the Book.²⁰ from which I borrow—among other things—the tripartite model of the literary market (reader, writer and editor/publisher) that Robert Darnton describes in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (1990).

Seen from each of these multiple perspectives, the purpose of representing the figure of venality suddenly seems, momentarily, less clearly discernable: as a subject, the prostitute appears to confirm the author's control; yet as a metaphor, she is the mirror of his subjugation to others' desires. The key, then, lies in looking at moments when subject collapses into metaphor. That is, when fictional prostitutes are depicted doing the work of a writer: i.e. reading in a way that exceeds mere consumption, and/or writing with an eye toward public circulation. All the novels I analyze contain depictions of prostituted figures in one or more such processes of reading and/or writing; moreover, these scenes are often central to the work's general argument. Such depictions shift the reader's attention away from the sex and class of the prostituted *characters* and ask us to focus, instead, on the embedded constructions of the work's author, as well as his imagined audience, and what it means to them for a writer or reader to be prostituted. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, the presence of a prostitute as a reader, writer or book, invites us to

²⁰ Book historians, shaped by Henri-Jean Martin and Lucien Febvre's *L'apparition du livre* (1958) whose work stops at 1800, have been slower to consider nineteenth-century book production as distinct from contemporary processes, until the digital turn of the 1990s. My project thus looks to scholars like Willa Silverman whose book *The New Bibliopolis: French Book Collectors and the Culture of Print 1880—1914* (2008) inspires me to keep striving to bridge the gap between the impact of a work's contents and the material form in which it circulates.

interrogate writing that is purportedly about venal women and men, and to ask what it communicates about the artist's experience of an entirely different economic arrangement. I use such scenes to construct interpretive lenses that will allow us to better understand the authors' relationships to the literary market, and to consider how a writer might depict illicit subjects as a means to further his own career.

I argue that depictions of reading and writing in novels about prostitutes make the venal body an effective, but perilous, site for the production of new ideas about the professional writer. Effective, in that the ideas the novels supported continue to echo in current Western notions of genius, intellectual property and labor, and creative license. Yet perilous in that, as an image of intellectual venality, the literate prostitute risks mapping the venal body—sexed, gendered, and working class—back onto the figure of the idealized author, or his body of work. Through the five chapters of this dissertation, I trace the evolution of the ideal professional novelist created, in relief, as a figure reflected by, yet superior to, the prostitute. In each chapter, I demonstrate that rhetorical mastery over the fictional prostitute—a constant throughout stylistic shifts—helps the works' male writers propagate notions of cultural capital and intellectual property in relation to evolving ideas about gender and class.

My first chapter shows that evoking the trope of the prostitute, even if purely as a metaphor, allows a male author, at any point in the century, to define the literary elite as those capable of making the socially marginal circulate as cultural capital. To do this, I compare the use of the prostitute as a rhetorical device in several of the century's repositories of *argot*--language associated with *le peuple*--the use of which is inextricably linked to depictions of prostitutes as fictional subjects. I then turn to individual novelist's depictions, beginning, in chapter two, with Balzac's work during the literary crisis at the end of the 1830's. I argue that

Balzac draws parallels between the performative attributes of the literate prostitute and the venal journalist in order to produce a notion of literary genius—which, I suggest, consists of originality of thought in addition to talent with a pen—as a readable sign of masculinity. In chapter three, I maintain that, for the mid-century writer Dumas *fils*, the symptomatic similarities between the literate *courtisane* and her young bourgeois lover produce literary authority as the ability to control and profit from (rather than be infected by) the flow of both “liquid” and cultural capital. (The term “liquid” capital encompasses both the contagion signified by the diseased, feminized body as well as the exchangeability inherent to money.) The fourth chapter addresses three Naturalist writers' production of critical distance from a provocative subject as the characteristic distinguishing an elite class of readers from the newly literate masses as the third quarter of the century finally saw a decline in state censorship. I argue that depictions of gritty, working-class prostitutes as readers in the novels by J.-K. Huysmans, Edmond de Goncourt and Emile Zola serve to chastize bourgeois critics who sought to claim authority over literary production by privileging a work of art's content over its form. I conclude by returning to the relationship between literary genius and prostitution in a study of modernist writer Marcel Proust's depiction of Morel, a male prostitute who is also a writer and a musical genius. I argue that, for both Proust and his narrator, genius is not a characteristic of a particular sex or class, but of a certain privileged fluidity of identity that allows the artist to translate the unsayable into signs, an ability that can preserve both the artist and the work of art from the commodifying effects of public circulation.

I ultimately conclude, in the closing pages of the dissertation, that we cannot fully understand the figure of the professional, literary intellectual as both a public authority and a star-like object of public desire—the figure that came to be dominant in French society during

the nineteenth-century and remained so through the twentieth century—unless we examine the gendering of the literary intellectual as male, a process that includes (but is by no means limited to) the construction of the literary profession in opposition to the feminized position of labor in public circulation represented by prostitution.

Historical Context: maisons de presse and maisons de passe Paris, 1830-1923

Paris was, as Walter Benjamin has so famously declared, the capital of the nineteenth century.²¹ Indeed: not only did it operate as a cultural center in the European collective conscious, but policies related to prostitution across the continent also referred to the French regulatory system, originated in Paris, as a model.²² If contemporary Western views of sexual identity and consumer capitalism can both be traced to nineteenth-century Europe, then it is important to understand the era's obsession with prostitution, the intersection of these two oft-separated spheres. In nineteenth-century Parisian politics, writes historian Jill Harsin, prostitution occupied center stage as a "symbol of social control and the relations between the sexes and classes" (357). In this climate, what it meant for the nineteenth-century Parisian authors to "sell one's self" as an artist took on a variety of highly charged, temporally specific definitions. Therefore, before we can investigate how the metaphor functions, it is important to establish some historical framework for both prostitution and professional writing.

Between the 1830 law that declared the toleration of prostitution and the rise of the abolitionist movement through World War I (which would eventually culminate in the 1946 Marthe Richard law banning prostitution), French writers and artists produced myriad

²¹ "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *The Arcades Project*, Ed. and Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002, p. 3 - 26.

²² Consider, for example, the British Contagious Diseases Act of 1864.

representations in visual arts, theatre and literature that publicly exposed a kaleidoscope of women and men practicing various forms of prostitution. One on hand, the pervasiveness of the subject in literature reflects an increase in the visibility of the real practice of prostitution—and in efforts to trace its limits—in the nineteenth-century Parisian city-scape. On the other hand, the roles that prostitutes came to play in literature reflect changes to the broader fields of art and public discourse that may seem only distally related to sexuality as a public health issue.

First, it is necessary to remind our reader that public prostitution had been a constant presence in Paris from the time of Charlemagne. The exclusion and/or containment of women on the margins of society was the focus: those found to be prostituting themselves were driven just outside the city walls to the *bordeaux*; after 1684, arrested prostitutes were detained and sent for treatment at the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière.²³ However, the steady influx of the urban population beginning in the mid-eighteenth century—in concert with the low wages characteristic of early industrial Europe—led to a constant rise in the number of individuals offering their bodies in exchange for some financial means of subsistence. It was under the Napoleonic code that the system of “tolérance” began, with the understanding that prostitutes, like sewers, were a necessary feature in a tempered city: the latter for removing human waste from the streets, the former for siphoning off unwanted, excessive desire away from the family. Both systems would take time to install. The reorganization of city space—from the efforts to shut down the brothels and gambling houses around the Palais Royal in 1830, to the expansion of the sewer system, from the construction of the covered *passages* and public urinals, to the famous large-scale renovations known as Haussmanization—increased general mobility, made common spaces

²³ For further details on the legal treatment of prostitutes up through the Revolution, see the first half of Jill Harsin’s chapter “Prostitution, Toleration, and the Law” in *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-century Paris* (1985), or Erica-Marie Benabou’s thorough work, *La Prostitution et la police des mœurs au XVIIIe siècle* (1987).

more accessible, and multiplied the number of areas in which one might encounter working-class prostitutes on the streets—areas that historian Alain Corbin refers to as “prostitutional space”.²⁴

Second, the fact that prostituted women appeared in nineteenth-century artists’ depictions as examples of various types—the *courtisane*, the Lorette, the *fille de joie*, etc.—echoes their introduction into legal and medical discourses as subjects distinct from other women and other members of the working class. Reformed policing practices reflect the kind of shift in focus from an individual’s behaviors onto the inherent state of the individual’s nature. Eighteenth-century policies mirrored concerns with controlling public women’s behaviors as well as that of their clients.²⁵ Following the short-lived decriminalization of prostitution after the 1789 revolution, the prostitutes themselves became the focus. Proto-sociological studies, beginning with Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet’s 1836 study *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, tried to document the physical or psychological characteristics used to distinguish a prostitute from other women or men in the new urban spaces.²⁶ While prostitution was, legally, a tolerated profession,

²⁴ *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*. [Les Filles de noce.] Trans. Alan Sheridan, 1986, p. 142.

²⁵ See Bénabou, op. cit.

²⁶ If Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet’s study has become a go-to text to analyze in contemporary critical literature on prostitution, it is because this publication was not only single-handedly foundational for the Parisian system of legal prostitution, known as *tolérance*, the duration of which spanned the century under investigation here. Furthermore, it is because it is the one work that all authors turned to while doing research for their fictional depictions of the city’s *filles de joie*. It is also the single work that would become the most cited (and most imitated) work for future medical- and legal-minded writers.

It has not yet, however, been clearly pointed out that Parent’s work itself also shows the changing power of textual inscription at work. When it came to the nineteenth-century hygienist’s quest for understanding prostitution, there were only certain ways of telling the story of its presence in the city that were acceptable. Parent, however, dismisses the authority of these preceding centuries’ more narrativized accounts of prostitution, claiming that much of the existing knowledge about prostitutes had been based merely in outdated received ideas, not factual evidence. For example, he critiques Rétif de la Bretonne’s recommendations for the management of Parisian prostitution by dismissing the original pornographer’s knowledge as merely the product of an imagination fueled by libertine literature: “Dans ce travail, fruit d’une imagination en délire, on reconnaît l’homme qui a lu tout ce qui concerne les prostituées, et qui possède à cet égard la plus vaste érudition” (184). Parent’s use of the term “érudition” can only be sarcastic: the eighteenth-century writer’s fictional accounts of prostitutes, Parent claims, are, by definition, pornography in the nineteenth-century sense of the word: texts that, he feels, only render a reader delirious. Fictional, or even romanesque accounts of real encounters, thus could not, and should not—says Parent—guide public policy. Additionally, he establishes Rétif’s writing practice as the result of insufficient objectivity: “on ne

the *bureau de mœurs* was established to enforce legal and medical regulation of the women working as prostitutes.²⁷

Third, if the regulatory fervor sought to assuage the public's fear of prostitution, the literary representations that draw on those legal and medical discourses also expose an equal level of fascination with the figure of the prostitute as a recognizable fixture in Parisian society.²⁸ A certain scopophilia underlies the public obsession with the *courtisane*, the dazzling figures resented by the proper women whose elegance was somehow lessened for being the sign of socially legitimate wealth. (Because of their status as "social phenomenon," to use Joanna Richardson's phrase, our study would be remiss to ignore the star-like visibility of the *courtisanes*.²⁹) The realist tradition in literature, extending through the Naturalist movement and into modernism, continued to translate the desire to see, in order to better understand, the prostituted "other" as a reflection of an increasingly democratic society. Thus, the number of representations again multiply as the figure opposite the *courtisane* on the social spectrum—the working-class public prostitute—becomes a suitable subject for works of art.

A subject's "suitability" to appear in a work of art depends entirely on the broader (and more difficult) question of whether a thing can or cannot be considered "art" in a given society at a given time. Traditionally, aesthetics—the philosophy of art—focuses on the properties of an

tarde pas à voir qu'il n'a pas approfondi le sujet dont il parle; qu'il ne connaît ni les mœurs, ni les goûts, ni les habitudes de la plupart des prostituées de Paris; qu'il n'a pas suivi ces femmes dans toutes leurs classes et dans toutes les périodes de leur vie" (185).

²⁷ Jill Harsin examines its multiple—and ultimately futile—attempts at regulation, in *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, 1985.

²⁸ If the Abbé Prévost's novel *Les aventures du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* featured a public woman in a central role in 1731, it was not until around 1830 that the heroine's literary descendants would begin to multiply exponentially.

²⁹ While Corbin and Harsin's studies both illustrate the difficulty of making a living as a prostitute, Richardson's book *The Courtesans: The Demi-monde in 19th-Century France* focuses on the few women who managed to make a career of what she succinctly calls "sell[ing] her favors well" (1). While limited in number, these women were both a product and a symbol of the decades of complete social and economic restructuring between the Restoration and the Third Republic.

object itself, and/or its public.³⁰ Cultural historian Jacques Rancière, however, offers a broad account of “art” in Western society as a product of labor, positioning art history at the intersection of social, political and economic histories in *Le Partage du sensible: esthétique et politique* (2000). He widens the scope of aesthetics to include these three by collapsing Western history into a highly simplified—but useful—schema of three artistic “regimes.” While Rancière is not alone in considering the production of art within such a broader context,³¹ his concise articulation of the relationship between the struggle to define “art,” the shifts in the social position of the laborer, and the relationship of these two to political history has made his work exceptionally productive for my own. The arguments that I will make in the chapters that follow hinge on a rather Rancière-esque notion: that the series of stylistic battles over, and adjustments to, the literary representation of prostitutes by French artists during the nineteenth century are evidence of a bigger picture, that of a deeper, more radical shift in the place of the individual within a capitalist society.

Rancière proposes that, through the period commonly defined by political historians as the *ancien régime*, it was possible to trace a firm delineation between the kinds of labor that produced works of “art” and those that produced “non-art” objects. Things themselves thus could be seen to reflect the social order of those , in that the products of the artists’ seemingly exceptional labor were only available (and accessible) to members of the ruling elite. The complimentary notions of the artist’s exceptionality and the work of art’s exclusive public are inherent to a particular ideological framework that Rancière calls the “representational”

³⁰ This admittedly sweeping categorization is but a nod to a broad field of study elaborated through complex texts ranging from Aristotle’s to Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790).

³¹ Walter Benjamin also does this in the canonical essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”

regime.³² The classical art of the Enlightenment illustrates this regime: a fixed hierarchy orders the production, and the appreciation, of any given representation as a work of art by virtue of its genre, subject and execution.³³

During the nineteenth century's struggles to define a Republican social order, and to understand the role of art in a new democratic society, both the value of labor and the role of artistic representations were in constant dynamic tension between the known past and the unknown future. At the same time, the decline of the representative regime overlapped with the dawn of the new "aesthetic" regime, making for a turbulent period of shifts in the definition of "the arts" and its place in the new social order: art was becoming a product that was somehow both identical to, and yet still separate from, non-art. As we shall in the discussions of Balzac and Dumas (chapters two and three), the cultural value of a literary work in the 1830s and 40s was largely determined by the social status of the author. The genius author was portrayed as morally and intellectually superior to the journalist (or the *femme auteur*, or the would-be Romantic) via depictions of the fictionalized professional writer as barely distinguishable from the *courtisanes* they loved.³⁴ Thus, the metaphor of the "prostituted writer" clearly expressed the literary-minded

³² For a concise explanation of how "art" gradually became distinct from other practices and occupations through a series of paradigmatic shifts in Western society, see his responses to an interview published as *Le Partage du sensible: esthétique et politique*, Paris: La Fabrique-éditions, 2000. Rancière divides the history of mimesis (that is, humans making imitations of things in the world around them) into three "regimes." The second regime, which he calls *représentatif* or *poétique* interchangeably, is defined by the impetus to privilege the mimetic practice itself over the social utility of the imitation executed (the *how* becomes more important than the *why*).

³³ Accordingly, it is during the representative regime that "the arts" become their own category of social practices: "[un] principe de délimitation externe d'un domaine consistant des imitations [...] se développe en formes de normativité qui définissent les conditions selon lesquelles des imitations peuvent être reconnues comme appartenant en propre à un art et appréciées, dans son cadre, comme bonnes ou mauvaises, adéquates ou inadéquates" (29). The normative principle results in a general practice of differentiation between art and non-art: "partages du représentable et de l'irreprésentable, distinction des genres en fonction des représentés, principes d'adaptation des formes d'expression aux genres, donc aux sujets représentés, distribution des ressemblances selon des principes de vraisemblance, convenance ou correspondances, critères de distinction et de comparaison entre arts, etc." (29-30).

³⁴ The limited number of women writers who successfully wrote themselves into the canon created by realist authors suggests that such distinctions drawn between the public woman and the man of letters were an effective—if not entirely sufficient—part of an ideological campaign to define the novelist as a member of the masculine elite. See Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

writers' charges against the venal journalists whose artistic integrity had been corrupted by bourgeois society.

However, during the Second Empire, censors proposed that bourgeois society might, in fact, be facing corruption at the hands of literature. The line that had once separated the man of letters (the artist) from the prostituted writer (the laborer) was blurred by the significant changes in the social reality of both writers and prostitutes, the two figures on which the metaphor's stability depended. As the works discussed in chapter four demonstrate, with the rise of Naturalism at the end of the Empire and the beginning of the Republic, the regulated prostitute—*la fille en carte* or *en maison*—came to overshadow the *courtisane* as the most common venal woman in fiction.³⁵ What does this mean for the metaphor?

Rancière seems to view the censorship trials under the Second Empire as part of the overlap in regimes, which he discusses in an essay about Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*.³⁶ On one side of the battle of regimes were the conservative Bourgeois critics who believed the role of art was to preserve political stability, as it had under the *ancien régime*. They therefore found certain subjects unsuitable to works of art: the contemporary philosopher cites a nineteenth-century critic of *Madame Bovary* who faults the work for depicting "the pathological overexcitement of sense and imagination in dissatisfied democracy."³⁷ On the other, were Realist writers like Baudelaire and Flaubert who sought proof of the exceptional nature of the artist's craft in his ability to represent a democratic array of subjects. In fact, however, each of the two

³⁵ Dottin-Orsini and Grojnowski inventory "les principales oeuvres narratives de fiction (romans et nouvelles) ainsi qu'un certain nombre d'essais littéraires et de pièces de théâtre sur la prostitution" between 1840 and 1914. They exclude works written purely as erotic entertainment. This list includes twenty-one titles published in the three decades between 1840 and 1870; in the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century, they catalogue seventy-one ("La Prostitution dans la littérature de 1840 à 1914," *Un joli monde*, LIII - LIV).

³⁶ "Killing Emma Bovary," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), p. 233-248.

³⁷ Armand de Pontmartin, *Nouvelles Causeries du samedi*, Paris, 1859, p. 315. Cited in "Killing Emma Bovary," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), p. 236.

groups sought to both affirm and resist an increasingly democratic definition of art in order to support the production of a new, invisible, social hierarchy. By the time modernism is in full effect, as we shall see in the Proust chapter, the production of a separate hierarchy based on cultural capital is well under way.

The Prostituted Writer

Let us now return—as a means of bringing this introductory chapter full circle—to the metaphor as it appears in Flaubert’s letter cited at the beginning: “Notre siècle est un siècle de putains, et ce qu’il y a de moins prostitué, jusqu’à présent, ce sont les prostituées.” Let us consider the letter as a whole, in order to see how prostitution serve the author as a framework for a certain kind of writing practice. His indication of the *putain* as a point of reference for the writing profession works in two significant ways. First, it comments on the economic position of the writer by practically erasing the stakes of prostitution’s indiscriminate exposure of the sexual body. When Flaubert says that professional authors—like him—are more prostituted than the average woman selling herself on the street, he replaces a sexually available human body with a publicly circulating written body of work.

However, if the embodied quality of prostitution is erased, the second—and seemingly contradictory—effect of the metaphor is to underline the *sexed*, and gendered, quality of the typical prostitute. The difference between the two terms in the comparison—the adjective *prostitué* and the noun *prostituées*—is, at the most basic level, the linguistic marker of sexual difference. This difference both hides and reveals the wide cultural differences between the public man and the public woman.³⁸ One who is *prostitué* by the literary market, Flaubert seems

³⁸ See Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, 1998. “On the one hand, our inherited term ‘public’ suggest the opposite of ‘private,’ that which pertains to the people as a whole, to

to imply, could never occupy the feminized position of one who might, instead, be literally *prostituée*, or simply *une prostituée*.

While Flaubert may not have intended his use of the “prostituted writer”—a ubiquitous *idée reçue*—to communicate to Louise Colet that women cannot be authors, the metaphor comes at the conclusion to a commentary on modern art. He begins it by expressing his disdain for a fashion magazine editor’s choice to publish writing produced by seamstresses. “Eh bien, je crois que partout et à *propos de tout*, on peut faire de l’art. Qui s’est jusqu’à présent mêlé des articles de modes ? des couturières !” At first, Flaubert does not seem to be targeting only women here: he argues that seamstresses are simply too specialized to be able to grasp “fashion” in a larger sense—like *tapissiers*, *cuisiniers* and *tailleurs* whose focus on parts limits their knowledge of the whole. He sees such specialization as an extension of the stupidity stemming from bourgeois industrialism, which valued cheaper, faster means to imitate the products of formerly artisanal processes.

Imitation, Flaubert argues, is at odds with the level of thought and creativity required to *reproduce* reality in art.³⁹ His complaint about the bad reproductions of clothing and furniture—objects that once functioned as stable signs of an exclusive aristocratic society—extends to the realm of the literary: “Combien de braves gens qui, il y a un siècle, eussent parfaitement vécu sans Beaux Arts, et à qui il faut maintenant de petites statuettes, de petite musique et de petite littérature !” While the subject may be “braves gens,” the last term, “petite littérature,” targets the new (and rapidly growing) class of readers born of education reform: women and members of

community or nationwide concerns [...]. Public is that which is open, manifest, common, and good. A public man is one who acts in and for the universal good; a public thing is that which is open to, may be used by, or shared by all members of the community [...]. On the other hand, a public woman is a prostitute, a commoner, a common woman. A public action is then one authored from or authorized by the masculine position. Only the latter is truly general, community-spirited, and universal in its consequences” (3).

³⁹ Flaubert writes, “La raison est la même qui fait que les peintres de portraits font de mauvais portraits (les bons sont peints par des penseurs, par des créateurs, les seuls qui sachent *reproduire*).”

the working and middle classes. The line is clearly drawn between great literature and articles written by seamstresses. Theirs is merely the imitation of writing, falsely valued by those who support the newspapers that circulate poor imitations of art.

If crinoline is the sign of cheap imitation of high culture, its role in the demise of fashion appears strangely connected to the prostitution of the writer: “*La crinoline a dévoré les fesses, notre siècle est un siècle de putains.*” In a literal reversal of prostitution’s exposure of the naked body, seamstresses’ crinolines are held responsible for the disappearance of the undisguised reality metonymically represented by *les fesses*. Guilty by association, the seamstresses themselves, the women whose writing circulates publicly (as well as those who would read such writing) appear responsible for the prostitution of the *grand auteur*. Flaubert’s disgust for the “farce” to which the new readership has reduced his craft thus tacitly serves to make the place of public literary exchange unwelcoming to women, members of the working class, and especially working-class women.

Such tacit gendering of the professional writer is not unique to Flaubert, nor to his use of the prostitute-writer metaphor. It is not within the scope of this study to demonstrate that the ubiquitous representations of prostitution by male authors deterred women writers from pursuing careers as novelists. Instead, through my analysis I seek to draw attention to how medical, legal and artistic discourses were used to support the *gendering* of the professional writer through depictions of prostitution. It is not insignificant that the depictions I chose were all produced by male authors who were, or would come to be, seen as canonical, partly due to their own self-promotion. If my corpus constitutes a lens through which to examine the nineteenth century, it is my hope that my study will encourage readers to reconsider the production of current ways of understanding gender and capitalism. It is to this end that I propose, now, exploring the specific

ways in which representations of the prostitute as the “negative” of the author and/or his public serves to produce writing as simultaneously a high art and a commercial product unique to the modern, capitalist, Republican era.

CHAPTER ONE: P IS FOR “P...”: THE PROSTITUTION OF WORKING-CLASS LANGUAGE IN SLANG
DICTIONARIES

For Alfred Delvau, one of the more poetic authors of the slang dictionaries that proliferated throughout the nineteenth century, *argot*—coded language once associated with criminals—was not only language used *by* working-class prostitutes: it was itself an alluring figure of ill repute. In the preface to his 1867 *Dictionnaire de la langue verte*, he justifies the presence of vulgar language in realist fiction (and, as a result, mainstream bourgeois culture) in the following way:

...pour que les écrivains de valeur—au théâtre, dans le roman, dans la fantaisie—se soient laissés raccrocher par ces expressions hardies, forcées de faire le trottoir, parce que sans domicile légal, il faut qu’elles aient des séductions, des irrésistibilités que n’ont pas les mots de la langue officielle. (ix)

His paradoxical description uses the prostitute as a metaphor for *argot*, calling on rhetoric right out of the highly publicized debate over the tolerance of prostitution. On one hand, he appears to valorize slang expressions, acknowledging their appeal, and portraying their illicit circulation as a form of victimization; by doing so, he defends the writers who use *argot*, and criticizes the institutions responsible for the criminalization of both words and authors. On the other hand, however, by evoking the discourse of the regulation of prostitutes which aimed to prevent contact between proper (pure) women and public (contaminated) women, Delvau recognizes—and thereby maintains—*argot* and “la langue officielle,” as separate linguistic spheres. This binary, traced on to that of gender, restricts proper women to the sphere of proper language, effectively precluding them from joining the (proper male) realist novelists in the use of slang.

In this dissertation, I argue that representations of prostitution helped male, bourgeois writers exert control over the literary marketplace. In this chapter, I demonstrate that even men who produced slang dictionaries contributed to this process. Dictionaries were, on a whole, seen as objects of cultural authority in the nineteenth century. Dictionaries of improper language, however, like Delvau's, were essentially voyeuristic objects of literary entertainment, produced by educated bourgeois men *for* educated bourgeois men; they are hardly the stuff of a literary canon. And yet by the end of the century, they circulated widely: some saw more than nine editions. Furthermore, like the novelists discussed later, they both defend and condemn public women in prefaces that are supposedly about language. For these reasons, they are thus indicative of pervasive mentalities within the literary industry over the course of a century of realist writing.¹ In short, I argue that slang dictionary authors evoked the literary trope of the prostitute as part of an effort to establish bourgeois male authority over non-standard language, thereby making *argot* the rightful property of (male) realist novelists.

In juxtaposing a wide variety of slang dictionaries published between 1827 and 1894, this chapter demonstrates that Delvau's use of the prostitute as a metaphor for *argot* is not unique. In fact, the authors of almost all slang dictionaries refer to prostitution in a more or less rhetorical manner in the prefaces that guide their reader's contact with the lexicon. Doing so normalizes their authority (and by extension, that of their readers) over popular language and its speakers. Equating slang with the prostitute works—as we shall see—because of the following two effects of evoking the figure of the public woman. First, when a dictionary author compares slang to prostitutes he effectively feminizes, criminalizes, pathologizes, and/or commodifies the words

¹ I am defining "realist" broadly here, as Lawrence Schehr does in *Figures of Alterity: French Realism and its Others*. Realist works, which, Schehr argues, includes novels written over the course of the century between Stendhal and Proust, claim "the capacity to be universal," to mimetically represent *all* aspects of the world, and thereby bring order to the unknown: they attempt to "extend the idea of the universal to other realms from the implicit center of the white, male, bourgeois subject" (10, 15).

contained in the dictionary. (This contradicts any stated claims to valorize slang and rescue it from the margins of society.) Second, by making non-standard language a public woman, the dictionary author appropriates economic and cultural power—if not legal and medical authority—over both the vocabulary and its source. (This occurs, even as most authors take pains to distance themselves from the *Académie française* and other proscriptive institutions that seek to “police” or “quarantine” bad language.)

This second effect is inextricably linked to my third argument. I propose that this process is indicative of an overlapping set of shifts in the artistic and political domain. The dictionaries are witness, on one hand, to the movement toward what Jacques Rancière calls the aesthetic regime of art (wherein form is privileged over content in the determination of what is recognized as “art”), and on the other, the historical evolution in which the market begins to dictate both social mores and artistic merit in a capitalist state. We cannot understand how the recurring trope of the prostitute reflects these two transformations, without first considering the role of the slang dictionary in nineteenth century French literary culture. Consequently, we will turn now to an examination of slang dictionaries as a corpus that functions as a site for the production of cultural authority.

Baudelaire’s dictionaries: between lexicography and literature

Dictionaries were all the rage in nineteenth-century France. In the broadest sense of the term, a dictionary is any book that presents information in alphabetical order: at the limits of this category one can find works such as the 1826 abolitionist pamphlet posing as a guide to Parisian nightlife entitled *Dictionnaire anecdotique des Nymphes du Palais Royal et autres quartiers de*

*Paris, par un homme de bien.*² However (and perhaps surprisingly), the overwhelming majority of publications called *dictionnaires* in the nineteenth century were genuinely guides to language (at least in part). Since our discussion of representations of prostitution is focused on the ideologies granting or denying access to the literary market—those shaping practices of reading and writing, such as education, gender and class—rather than real prostitutes, we will set aside both *guides roses* and abolitionist propaganda masquerading as lexical treasuries. While the laws governing literature are complex, I echo Schehr in writing, “I must state the obvious: realism happens in language” (7). And language is made of words.

Charles Baudelaire, in his 1859 article portraying novelist and critic Théophile Gautier, elevates their shared affinity for dictionaries to the level of a litmus test for literary valor in his account of their first meeting:

Il me demanda ensuite, avec un œil curieusement méfiant, et comme pour m’éprouver, si j’aimais à lire des dictionnaires. Il me dit cela d’ailleurs [...] du ton qu’un autre aurait pris pour s’informer si je préférais la lecture des voyages à celle des romans. Par bonheur, j’avais été pris très jeune de lexicomanie, et je vis que ma réponse me gagnait de l’estime.³

² Anon. *Dictionnaire anecdotique des Nymphes du Palais Royal et autres quartiers de Paris, par un homme de bien*. Paris: Imprimerie de Sellique, rue des Vieux-Augustin no. 8, 1826. This publication, on first glance, resembles the catalogues of prostitutes known as a *guides roses* which, due to their content and their intended use, were inexpensively produced and routinely discarded. This slim volume supposedly gives the addresses of a number of women for hire, organized alphabetically by first name (including two Rosalines, three Roses, a Rosette and a Rosine). It is housed at the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris in a collection of documents that figured in the debate over the closure of the brothels in the Palais Royal quarter. This *Dictionnaire* would have attracted the attention of readers familiar with Cuisin’s 1815 book *Les Nymphes du Palais Royal*, a collection of erotic slang and illustrative scenes. This latter work, however, is, in fact, propaganda arguing for the closure of the brothels. Each short description lists physical features and preferred clientele, but also includes something unappealing or even frightening (missing teeth, indications of venereal disease). Some are followed by disheartening tales of the women’s downfalls.

³ “Théophile Gautier,” originally published in 1861. See Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, tome II. Paris: Gallimard, 1986. p. 108.

Lexicomania was an eccentricity admitted to by many writers who shared Baudelaire and Gautier's love of words (and the subsequent fetishization of lexicographical objects that this word implies). In Baudelaire's description, his taste for reading dictionaries—and the lexical mastery that such practice afforded—increased the young poet's worth in the eyes of the established author. He includes the story in his portrait of his colleague, though, because he knows that his audience would also recognize lexicomania as an indication of a superior writer.

For Gautier, Baudelaire says appreciatively, the ability to label any- and everything was at the heart of the creative process. “Ce fut justement à propos des dictionnaires qu’il ajouta ‘*que l’écrivain qui ne savait pas tout dire, celui qu’une idée si étrange [...] qu’on la supposât [...] prenait au dépourvu et sans matériel pour lui donner corps, n’était pas un écrivain*’” (ibid). Thus, for both poet and novelist, words are the material supplies necessary to the writers’ art. Before a writer can express every idea imaginable, he must first master every possible expression. But at what point does such mastery over language begin?

Since the 1539 publication of the *Dictionnaire françoislatin*, the term *dictionnaire*—from the latin root *dictio* for the act of speaking—has indicated a collection of words that reflect the current reality of a people united (more or less) by language.⁴ Yet since the foundation of the *Académie française*, lexicography also served a prescriptive function, codifying the usage of the dominant class and disseminating it to all speakers as norm and ideal. A return to a wider definition of common usage in nineteenth-century lexicography is reflected in the 1835 preface to the sixth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*. The author, A.-F. Villemain, connects this edition to the prior editions of the past two centuries. Like many other thinkers in

⁴ According to Jean Pruvost in *Les Dictionnaires de langue française*, this work, printed by Robert Estienne, was not only the first account of the French language to be called a “dictionnaire,” but it also set the stage for usage to dominate the production of dictionaries. The use of the French word in the title, he says, “dénote plus particulièrement la nouvelle réalité d’une nomenclature donnée en langue vernaculaire” (20).

both arts and sciences, he looked to the beginnings of the French nation in search of new ways to reflect the rapidly shifting reality of the post-revolutionary people in its movement toward democracy. Language, says the *académicien*, is “la forme apparente et visible de l’esprit d’un peuple.”⁵

And yet what became visible when examining this language in the early nineteenth century was, however, precisely the extent to which the French were still far from being “un peuple,” at least linguistically.⁶ The fields of linguistics, etymology, and lexicography grew exponentially, coevolving with the Romantic movement in art and literature. Both found inspiration in antiquity and non-western cultures; both also valorized rural and working-class populations in France as subjects that had been largely ignored by the dominant intellectual and literary discourses in the previous two centuries.

The result was not only the simultaneous appearance of novels like Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, the production of more expansive dictionaries of standard French, rich in etymology, and new, specialized dictionaries documenting linguistic interest in topics ranging from regional languages to scientific jargon to prison slang. It also led to an increased overlap between the scholarly study of language, literary mastery of it, and political engagement. Hugo, for example, defended his use of slang as an overt rejection of “the pre-revolutionary stylistic conventions that relegated local dialects and slang to low genres,” says French studies scholar Pascale Gaitet in *Political Stylistics: Popular language as literary artifact* (1). According to her, by demanding

⁵ Abel-François Villemain, “Préface à la sixième édition – 1835.” Introduction and notes by Henri de Vaulchier. *Les Préfaces du Dictionnaire de l’Académie française 1694-1992*. Sous la direction de Bernard Quemada. Paris: Champion, 1998. p. 311-378.

⁶ I wish to emphasize the difference I am making here between the claim often made citing Louis Chevalier’s 1958 *Classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses*, that the proportions of Parisian society changed radically in the first part of the nineteenth century, and my own point, which is that the social division definitely became more *visible*, even if the actual composition of the city changed less dramatically than Chevalier suggests in the decades between the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. For more on this change in sensibility, see Alain Corbin, *Le Miasme et la jonquille*. Paris: Flammarion, 1982.

that “the French lexicon now reflect the republican virtues of liberty and equality [rather than a stratified social order],” Hugo charged his fellow writers with the duty “to ensure the propagation of these values not only in the content but also in the form of their work” (ibid).

The common desire for such representations of the people and its language is inherent to the totalizing reach of what Schehr calls “the realist project” (7). In his view, a realist praxis in literature necessarily includes both the universalizing gesture that reinforces the usual hierarchy privileging the white, male, bourgeois subject, as well as the destabilizing introduction of figures posed to become subjects in spite of their otherness. In the realm of linguistics, this first gesture is expressed through what language historian Anthony Lodge refers to as the diffusion of a standardized language through top-down interventions such as the *Académie*’s dictionary and the imposition of French through compulsory elementary education.⁷ Historian Alain Corbin expands this gesture to include sociology, claiming that census-taking, criminology and studies of public hygiene were expressions of the same desire to decode urban life that drives the Balzacian novel.

A dictionary of any ilk appears to offer the detailed, orderly view of current reality that the realist writers idealized. Yet the very abundance of new and revised editions witnesses to the continual expansion of the language of “real life” that circulated, unaccounted for. The realist project is thus an effort to merely keep up with reality. So many new dictionaries of standard language were produced that Pierre Larousse declared the nineteenth century as “le siècle des dictionnaires” in the 1866 preface to his *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*. At the risk of offending his memory, however, this statement should perhaps be modified to read “le siècle

⁷ See Anthony Lodge, “Diffusion of the standard: 19th to 20th,” *French: From Dialect to Standard*. Routledge, 1993. p. 200-206. For one example of the normalizing scholarship that documented regional speech only to better eradicate it, see Jean-Michel Rolland, *Dictionnaire des expressions vicieuses et des fautes les plus communes dans les Hautes et les Basses-Alpes, accompagnées de leurs corrections*, 1811.

des dictionnaires *d'argot*,” as the genre of the slang dictionary was truly an invention of the nineteenth century.⁸ An explosion of slang dictionaries sought to codify less-than-Academic-caliber vocabulary: no fewer than fifty-four different *new* titles were published between 1800 and 1899, not counting reprints and updated editions. This is in stark contrast with the six dictionaries of Latin and French slang created between 1455 and 1799.⁹

Dictionaries codifying *argot* would thus stand to both perform *and* destabilize the realist universalizing project by increasing the visibility of non-standard language. Gaitet suggests that documenting the use of non-standard French in both novels and slang dictionaries was indeed part of the bourgeoisie’s “project of objectification and domination,” (1991, 245).¹⁰ But how? Focusing on the slang dictionary as a genre unto itself will help us better understand how this documentation might manage (and/or fail) to work.

Over the course of the century, slang dictionaries vary greatly in appearance, and seem to treat slang quite differently, as suggested by the following collection of selected volumes. In general, for the first half of the century, representations of *argot* cater to the public’s fascination with tales of the criminal underworld, as seen in the anonymous 1827 *Dictionnaire d'argot, ou guide des gens du monde [...] par un monsieur comme il faut, ex-pensionnaire de Ste-Pélagie*, and the reproduction of the same vocabulary two years later as the 1829 *Nouveau Dictionnaire*

⁸ In the introduction to his bibliography, Volker Noll writes, “La lexicographie de l’argot en tant que telle ne commence qu’au XIXe siècle” (424). See Noll, Volker. “Les dictionnaires d’argot et les argots spéciaux,” *Travaux de linguistique et de philologie*, XXXI, 1993, pp. 423-475.

⁹ There are currently two published bibliographies considered to be comprehensive lists of slang dictionaries: the above-cited Noll (1993) Robert Yve-Plessis, *Bibliographie raisonnée de l’argot et de la langue verte en France du XVe au XXe siècle*. Paris: H. Daragon, 1901. The best resource for bibliographic information on the various editions of slang dictionaries, however, is the product of an online community of scholars, called simply *Argot*, that maintains the site www.languefrancaise.net/Argot (last accessed Aug. 13, 2015).

¹⁰ The following article offers a concise summary of the argument Gaitet makes in her book: “From the Criminal’s to the People’s: The Evolution of Argot and Popular Language in the Nineteenth Century,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 19 (2): 1991. p. 231-246. The expanded study appears in the above cited *Political Stylistics: Popular language as literary artifact*, New York: Routledge, 1992.

d'argot, par un ex-chef de brigade sous M. Vidocq (signed only “Bras-de-fer”). These two works both claim to allow their gentleman reader to navigate the dangerous parts of Paris protected from thieves by offering him the means by which to decipher criminal plots against him. While a work of considerably more heft, the 1836 study, which includes a dictionary, written by the criminal-turned-chief-of-police E.-F. Vidocq himself, *Les Voleurs, physiologie de leurs moeurs et de leur langage*, still capitalizes on this same interest. In fact, several critics point to Vidocq’s 1828 *Mémoires* as the text that began the trend in representing *les classes dangereuses* by inserting slang terms, defined parenthetically or in footnotes, which identifies the text as one clearly addressed to a bourgeois reader. This practice continued in Eugène Sue’s *Mystères de Paris*, published serially between 1839 and 1841. Savvy publishers in 1844 recognized the interest in both crime fiction and slang dictionaries and published an anonymously authored *Dictionnaire complet de l’argot employé dans les Mystères de Paris*.

After the political shift following the 1851 coup d’état, however, the genre comes to present slang in books that more closely resemble the scholarly publications devoted to the growing fields of the social sciences. If the dictionaries themselves are to be believed, *argot* was no longer restricted to criminals but denoted the popular language of the working class; furthermore, it had become a valid object of historical, linguistic interest. The authors include extensive histories of slang and describe their methodology—which we will discuss at greater length later—in terms evocative of the techniques of lexicographers of standard French and regional dialects: they give definitions, etymologies, and citations, and even list sources. Like standard dictionaries, they publish updated editions and supplements, claiming to incorporate neologisms and reflect changes in use.

And yet the authors of these dictionaries were primarily Parisian journalists and *bons vivants*, not *bona fide* linguists: several were educated in the law, but most were employed only by newspapers. The one thing they all had in common was their passion for the city itself. The volumes under consideration here include *Les excentricités de la langue française* (1858), republished as *Dictionnaire historique, étymologique et anecdotique de l'argot parisien* (1872) by Lorédan Larchey, a librarian at the Bibliothèque Arsenal and director of *La Petite Revue*; the *Dictionnaire de la langue verte* (1866) by Alfred Delvau, a satirical journalist and famous night-life critic; the *Dictionnaire du jargon parisien* (1878) by Lucien Rigaud, a journalist and author of a collection of *lieux communs*¹¹; *La Flore pornographique: glossaire de l'école naturaliste* (1883) by Ambroise Macrobe, a pseudonym of Antoine Laporte, a publisher, bibliophile and friend of Naturalist authors; and finally, the *Dictionnaire d'argot fin-de-siècle* (1894) by Charles Virmaître, a journalist and editor who authored a series of accounts of popular Parisian life with titles such as *Paris-impur*, *Paris-cocu*, *Paris-galant*, etc. in which he often defends the city's *maisons closes*.

Beginning as the language of a criminal, peripheral group, *argot* seems to have gained currency and became fashionable amongst the dominant class of well-read Parisian men-about-town. On one hand, it appears that, over the course of the century, slang's presence in literature helps move it from the political margins of society to the center, confirming Jacques Rancière's view of the nineteenth century as the dawn of the aesthetic regime in art, in which the forms of art are identical to "the forms that life uses to shape itself" (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 23). This transformation also follows a Foucauldian shift, as the changes appear to be facilitated by the mediation of the lexicons in the middle of the century claiming the objectivity of social

¹¹ Little more is known about Rigaud, however Robert Yves-Plessis lists him in his bibliography as one of the few "hommes consciencieux [qui...] méritent pleine confiance" among the authors of the later part of the century (74).

scientists. And this is not an inaccurate description of what happens. However, on the other hand, at each point in the century, as slang appears to move from margin to center, it is framed by—and contained in—an exclusively literary world. As such, the causes and effects of these shifts must be understood in that context. These works thus served a function in the Parisian literary marketplace beyond their stated intents, be this to pursue republican ideals or simply “épater les bourgeois.”

The world of slang dictionaries was that of commercial printing, journalism, marketing, and speculation: the world described in Honoré de Balzac’s *Illusions perdues*, and confirmed by publishing historian Christine Haynes in her study of the *éditeur* as an invention of the new, developing capitalist literary market and nineteenth-century politics.¹² Its denizens were educated, ambitious, and engaged in the literary sphere. They may have encountered each other as they frequented many of the same haunts, following the same trends in Parisian pop culture: publisher’s offices, theatres, restaurants and brothels. Delvau and Larchey, for example, both knew Baudelaire through their mutual acquaintance, the publisher Auguste Poulet-Malassy. Slang dictionary authors collected words from journal articles and serial novels; journalists and novelists consulted slang dictionaries to increase the effect of authenticity. While the language of the working class surely figured in the volumes, the works themselves are more a reflection of the movement of language within the interrelated circles of literature and commercial writing.

And yet, when the dictionaries engage in defining and defending realist literature under the aegis (or masquerade) of lexicography, they nevertheless *do* document the language heard by journalists in the theatre, the brothels and the streets. These amateur lexicographers manage to

¹² For the historical overview of the *éditeur*, see Haynes’ book *Lost Illusions: The Politics of Publishing in Nineteenth-Century France*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010. For a discussion of the polyvalent representation of the *éditeur* in literature, see her article “An “Evil Genius”: The Construction of the Publisher in the Postrevolutionary Social Imaginary,” *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Fall 2007)

perform authentic lexicographic work. The *dictionnaire d'argot* is a thus strangely hybrid genre with one foot in realist literature and the other in the developing fields of sociology and ethnography. As such, they illuminate how realist praxis can embrace everything from reference works to narratives found offensive to public decency. Therefore, the question of the legitimacy of the authors' knowledge of slang is not at hand here; what I am concerned with is how they use their mastery of this language to justify their authority over both slang and those who use it.

The words on the street: the prostitute as a metaphor for argot

In the prefaces to slang dictionaries published across the century, authors use the figure of the prostitute as a paradoxical point of reference for vulgar language. I use the qualifier “paradoxical” because, on one hand, authors claim to valorize the language of the working class and promote the utility of knowing it. However, on the other, the references to prostitution focus the reader's attention on the aspects of improper language that equate it with the figure of the venal woman as a threat to public order: her association with criminals, her diseased and contagious body, and her indeterminate regional and class origins which she disguises to infiltrate proper society. Analogously, on one hand, many authors position themselves in opposition to those who perform the official “policing” of language, such as the *Académie française*. On the other, the equation of slang to prostitutes reveals that, in spite of what they may say, the authors of these non-normative dictionaries do in fact consider their works' function to be part of a “regulatory” mechanism controlling the circulation of this language. In this way, texts that linguistics scholars agree are part of a normalizing discourse on the French language also effectively work to police the literary market by appropriating vulgar language for use by a male bourgeois author and enjoyment by a male bourgeois consumer.

Historically, *argot* originated as the language of a criminal organization that existed outside the physical and social limits of civilized society.¹³ While slang dictionary authors confirm this past in the histories of varying lengths included in their prefaces, many of them also appear to valorize *argot* by depicting its origins in a society of its speakers parallel to their own culture. Lucien Rigaud, for example, describes slang as the equivalent to proper French: it is “une langue de cour [...], avec ses écoles, sa Faculté, ses grammariens, ses professeurs, ses recteurs et ses lauréats” (vii). For Lorédan Larchey, the etymology of the word *argot* proves it is synonymous with “ruse, finesse, subtilité,” and is thus a term as applicable to the language of *les précieuses* and their *salons* as it is to that of thieves and the *tapis franc* (1872, 2).

Such comparisons of *argot* to proper, even elevated speech might appear to gesture toward Hugo’s call to break down the barriers separating the two, were it not for the fact that the comparisons are there to heighten the impression of an impassible distance between the social origins of the different groups who currently use slang: honorable writers, and common criminals/laborers. Larchey reminds his reader that the court he is describing is *la Cour des Miracles*, a euphemism specifying the slums of seventeenth-century Paris. And Rigaud’s point in proving that the term *argot* is widely applicable is to present his classification of several different (and separate) types of *argot*. As we shall continue to see, the rhetoric claiming to defend slang is consistently undone by metonymy, euphemism, and personification that highlight the persistent return of attributes common to both vulgar language and venal women in the social imaginary: public displays of sexuality, socially ambiguous origins, criminality, disease, filth, and commodification.

¹³ Contemporary lexicography scholars confirm this. See Anthony Lodge, cited above, and Georges Matoré, *La méthode en lexicologie*. Paris: Didier, 1953 [Second edition, 1972].

All slang dictionary authors insist that common use trumps grammarians when defining the limits of acceptable language in public circulation. They thereby tout the utility of their publications as justification for selling a repository of this potentially offensive language. At first, however, these claims to utility keep the language directly associated with the world of crime and, by association, prostitution. As I said earlier, the dictionaries in the first half of the century offered their readers a guide to slang that could protect them from thieves upon entering the seedier parts of the city. The anonymous author of the 1827 *Dictionnaire d'argot* recounts how his own ability to speak in slang allowed him to out-manuever two men plotting to steal his elegant coat (vii-viii). Two years later, “Bras-de-fer” writes, “L’auteur, en publiant ce *Nouveau Dictionnaire d'argot* [...], a eu pour but d’être utile à tous les gens du monde, et particulièrement à ceux qui, par leur position, se trouvent souvent exposés à rencontrer de ces individus qui, à l’aide de cette sorte de langage, se font passer pour étrangers et méditent ainsi impunément leurs mauvais desseins” (1829, “Avis” [NP]). This dictionary thus posits its usefulness as a *vade mecum* capable of leveling the field between the gentleman in a position of being exposed to thieves and those whose fluency in *argot* gives them a criminal advantage. But what position is this? And what, exactly, is exposed? It may be the body of the reader in a compromising position. The alternate title of the 1827 work—*Guide des gens du monde, pour les tenir en garde contre les mouchards, filoux, filles de joie, et autres fashionables et petites-maîtresses de la même trempe*—lists three women and two men, which may suggest that the reader is more likely to be swindled by a woman of loose morals.

Indeed, whether these early dictionaries prepare their reader to use slang or just understand it, they not only affirm the direct relationship of *argot* to prostitutes, they seem to collapse the distance between the two. The preface to the 1827 dictionary implies that the book

doubly protects its reader from contact with *les classes dangereuses*: it not only prepares him for encounters with thieves, but it also meets the reader's need for physical contact with a *fille de joie*, from whom young men learned *argot* before the publication of the dictionary.¹⁴ Similarly, the author of the 1849 dictionary, who signs the preface Halbert d'Angers, depicts the naive reader's urgent need for his dictionary: "Hommes vertueux ! peut-être l'homme qui vous coudoie forme le dessein de vous dévaliser. Sûr de n'être pas compris de vous, il parle librement à vos côtés du sort qu'il vous réserve. Rien ne peut vous sauver, rien que la connaissance de ce langage affreux qu'emploient entre eux les voleurs, les assassins et les prostituées" (7). This translation device both allows its reader to resist the potential marginalization of the upstanding gentleman visiting the foreign land of criminals, and seems to pose as a prophylactic when "rubbing elbows" in that setting. Indeed, d'Angers, like the anonymous author of the 1827 dictionary proposes his book as a risk-free alternative to direct contact with the threats to property, life and physical and moral health posed by said *voleurs*, *assassins* and *prostituées*: "je le conçois, vous rougirez de l'apprendre [l'argot] de la bouche de ceux qui s'en servent pour commettre ou pour faciliter leurs méfaits, mais vous ne risquez rien de l'apprendre de nous, dans la lecture de ce petit livre (7). Handling this book, he implies, is a safer alternative to contact with the mouths of native speakers.

And yet, if the usefulness of these dictionaries is supposedly to protect its reader from the threats posed by physical contact with thieves and prostitutes, the conflation of slang and prostitutes in these dictionaries also effectively reinscribes the desirability of *argot* and of

¹⁴ "Les jeunes gens de l'ancien régime, ces aimable roués qui s'adonnaient aux plaisirs avec tant d'ardeur, illustrés par leurs nombreux exploits galants, parachevaient leur éducation en faisant une étude particulière du langage appelé vulgairement *argot*, et les plus grand seigneurs ne dédaignaient point d'entrer en lice avec *une fille de joie*, pourvu qu'ils pussent profiter de ses leçons" (v).

entering the world of *les classes dangereuses*.¹⁵ D'Anger's preface simultaneously acknowledges and denies the similarity between the slang dictionary and the unregistered prostitute in responding to the inevitable critics: "Ce livre ne pourrait être mauvais que s'il était clandestin. Publié à bon marché et publiquement, il révèle aux honnêtes gens un langage qui est pour eux une menace perpétuelle [...]. En cela, l'auteur croit avoir mis au jour une publication véritablement utile et morale" (8). In addition to defending its utility, the author offers proof of his dictionary's morality—a trait absent from earlier works—by contrasting it with other books that circulated clandestinely, beyond the limits of the regulated literary market. However, this also implicates the author whose name does not appear on the cover or at the bottom of the preface, but only on the last page of the dictionary, and is presumed to be a pseudonym. It suggests a desire on his part to distance himself from unregistered prostitutes, individuals fluent in slang who circulate clandestinely in pursuit of financial gain: he concludes by insisting that his motivation was purely benevolent, "il sera assez récompensé s'il a l'espoir de faire quelque bien." The anxiety provoked by the similarity of the prostitute and the commercial writer, and the degradation in the status of literature from art form to common labor that this comparison implied, is the subject of chapters two and four.

Over the course of the century, the stated utility of documenting *argot* changes: the slang dictionary ceases to be protective armor in the face of class-based antagonism, and becomes, instead, a tool of objective, scientific inquiry. In 1861, Larchey responds to critics by referencing the thoroughness of his study: "nous croyons que cet essai de dictionnaire a son utilité comme sa sérieuse raison d'être" (viii). Rigaud's preface similarly announces the seriousness of his work, "un ouvrage de linguistique, un travail de recherches longues et laborieuses, un exposé vrai et

¹⁵ Such enjoyment can be called "slumming," to borrow Seth Koven's term for the respectable bourgeois' class's "attraction of repulsion" for the poor. See *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006.

consciencieux de termes étranges, souvent pittoresques” (i). At the same time, there is a notable disappearance of the assumption that slang is most often encountered in the company of prostitutes (or in books that substitute for them). What is going on here?

This progression in the utility of the dictionary from prophylactic to scientific parallels another shift in the domain in which the words circulate: by the mid-century, *argot* extends its reach beyond the population exclusively made up of members of *les classes dangereuses*. Its speakers include not only *le peuple* (which, in Paris, is *les classes laborieuses*) but also anyone who comes in contact with them. This contact may be purely imaginary, as for the readers of popular crime fiction, but the transmission of the language is no less real.

In both his 1861 dictionary and the renamed 1872 edition, Larchey cites author and playwright Albert Monnier who described familiarity with *argot* as a result of armchair tourism: “Il en est de l’argot comme de certaines îles de la Polynésie : on y aborde sans y pénétrer; tout le monde en parle, et bien peu de personnes le connaissent. [...] Par ci, par là un voyageur traverse ce Tombouctou parisien, et en ressort la tête farcie de mots bizarres qu’il répète sans les comprendre.”¹⁶ The utility of Larchey’s dictionary, then, the dictionary author argues, arises from this frequent use of *argot* in Paris. His book, he says, satisfies “un besoin très vif et très-répandu [...] de savoir *ce qui se dit*, —par opposition au besoin de savoir *ce qui doit se dire*” (1872, 16). While parts of the city remain exotic, the slang dictionary is no longer a phrasebook of terms in a foreign language, but a study of Parisian French.

Other authors echo this emphasis on the utility of documenting Parisian language as it is used. Delvau defends the value of his work by comparing himself to Sébastien Mercier, and referring to his dictionary as “un fidèle tableau des mœurs ondoyantes et diverses des Parisiens

¹⁶ Cited in Larchey 1861, xvi.

de l'an 1865-66" (1883, v-vi).¹⁷ By the end of the century, slang appears to have evolved from a set of words that a young man would only learn from a prostitute to language that even a society woman may hear in person. In his forward to Virmaître's 1894 *Dictionnaire d'argot fin-de-siècle*, Léo Trézenik (poet and member of the literary circle known as the Hydropathes) writes, "ce Dictionnaire est destiné à rendre les plus grands services aux femmes du monde qui vont, au cabaret du Mirliton, quérir des émotions un peu faisandées, et qui en reviennent mélancolieuses [...] de ce qu'elle n'ont pas goûté, n'ayant pas compris, toute la boue dont [...] les éclaboussa l'habile cabot-limonadier" (ix-x). And yet, as the equation of slang to "la boue," or filth, makes evident, its general acceptability remains in question. As we shall now see, it is through metaphor and euphemism, rather than metonymy, that the prostitute returns in discussions of slang in the second half of the century.

Speaking about speech is abstracting about an abstraction: metaphors for language abound in both lexicography and literature. Villemain, for example, compares French to music and to a body in his preface to the sixth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*. Hugo, in his famous defense of neologisms in the preface to *Cromwell*, compares languages to seas.¹⁸ For Émile Littré, the editor of the four-volume *Dictionnaire de la langue française* from 1863 to 1872, language is "ce flot mélangé d'incessantes créations de mots nouveaux" (ii).¹⁹

¹⁷ The complete quote is this: his ability to collect words in the streets "constitue le mérite [...] du Dictionnaire de la Langue verte, dont je désire qu'on dise [...] ce qu'on a dit du Tableau de Paris de Sebastien Mercier, qu'il a été pensé dans la rue et écrit sur une borne : cette ironie serait son éloge et ma recompense, parce qu'elle prouverait qu'il est un fidèle tableau des moeurs ondoyantes et diverses des Parisiens de l'an 1865-66" (v-vi).

¹⁸ Hugo wrote, "Toute époque a ses idées propres, il faut qu'elle ait aussi les mots propres à ces idées. Les langues sont comme la mer, elles oscillent sans cesse. A certains temps, elles quittent un rivage du monde de la pensée et en envahissent un autre. Tout ce que leur flot déserte ainsi sèche et s'efface du sol" (qtd. in Macrobie 4). This preface was a standard in the debate on the addition of neologisms to the standard lexicon; Macrobie cites it at length in his pastiche of this debate in his preface (4-5).

¹⁹ "Preface," *Dictionnaire de la langue française: Supplément renfermant un grand nombre de termes[...] suivi d'un dictionnaire étymologique...*, Paris: L. Hachette et cie., 1877.

The slang dictionary authors follow suit in metaphors that similarly depict slang as part of the natural world. However they often qualify their biological metaphors with distasteful traces of urban life. In the updated edition of Delvau's dictionary, published in 1883, the author evokes Hugo's sea of language, claiming to have taken the terms in *his* dictionary from "cet Océan de boue" that is the language of the streets (which, at the time, were coated in manure and other varieties of filth) (vi). In the preface to *La Flore pornographique*, Macrobe imagines a Hugolian flow of words, and similarly equates contemporary slang to filth: "Entre leur œuvre [celle des auteurs Naturalistes] et l'œuvre vaillante, robuste et franche de Rabelais, il y a la même différence qu'entre un fleuve et un égout" (18). If the words are of interest, it is only because they have been removed from the mire in which they originated. Thus, while slang is no longer restricted to *les classes dangereuses*, it is associated with *le peuple* in general. Such metaphors, in works that claim to valorize *le peuple* as a source of neologisms that would rejuvenate the French language, continue to equate this source to the popular image of the poorer quarters as sewers: overcrowded, smelly, and filled with the unavoidable, but foul, waste products of a modern city.

Moreover, in Delvau's preface at least, the mire in which slang originates is equated with a female body. The "Océan de boue" (iv) is both miasma and decaying body: "en remuant cette fange, en plongeant résolument dans les entrailles mêmes de cet océan de boue, d'où, si j'ai rapporté des madrépores et des polypes monstrueux, j'ai dû rapporter aussi quelques coraux et quelques perles" (iv emphasis mine). While the occasional coral or pearl may come to the surface, the residual image in Delvau's "valorization" of *argot* is a portrait of the working class population: monstrous in nature, growing exponentially out of "entrailles" that evoke animalistic births, and spreading decay in these same "entrailles," which, exposed, suggest physical

decomposition. And lest the pun be lost in the decay of time, it is worth noting that in the early 1860s, the *courtisane*, Cora Pearl, was at the height of her popularity. She was also one of a dozen or so truly socially successful women of the demi-monde: alluding to her thus underlines the rarity of finding something of value amid the ocean of filth that is the working class.

Additionally, if those words attractive enough to be selected for Delvau's dictionaries become less threatening due to their codification through the science of lexicography, this play on Cora Pearl's name also reminds us that popular recognition can function similarly to scientific codification: *courtisanes*, the exceptional prostitutes, are no less alluring or dangerous due to their circulation in public, but because they associate with an elite public, what they sell has a higher value. This fact is not lost on authors trying to sell illicit material during a point in a technological boom at which the market may have appeared saturated.

Indeed, these extended metaphors cannot help but implicate the authors themselves as in contact with these sources. However, the relationship of the researcher to his subject in the order of nineteenth-century scientific imagination comes in to play. Delvau calls himself a "lexical entomologist" and refers to the words in his dictionary as "papillons," "scarabées," and "chenilles." But, he insists, he also collects "anoplures," a family of parasites that includes not only head lice but also crabs (1883, iii).²⁰ He reports having gathered the words he compared to butterflies in this way: "j'ai obscurément [...] battu de mon crochet tous les ruisseaux, promené ma lanterne sourde dans les coins ténébreux" (iii). Once again, the urban erupts into the natural,

²⁰ Delvau could be referencing Alexandre Ysabeau's 1883 *Histoire naturelle élémentaire* which describes entomology and briefly lists the orders of insects, including Anoplura, defined thus: "Les *Anoplures* sont les moins intéressants et les plus dégoûtants des Insectes ; ils vivent en parasites aux dépense de l'homme et de divers animaux ; il suffit de nommer parmi eux le *Pou*, dont on se préserve aisément moyennant quelques habitudes de propreté. [... Les Anoplures] forment un anneau de transition entre les animaux d'un ordre inférieur et ceux d'une organisation plus avancée et plus complète" (78-79).

as slang becomes a parasite associated with overcrowding, poor hygiene and sexual promiscuity. The author, however, is set apart from his surroundings by the material traces of his profession.

Similarly, as the title and preface of Macrobe's work makes clear, *La Flore pornographique* catalogues the native flora of the field of porno-graphy, which he defines as writing about prostitutes, and cites Rétif de la Bretonne (19). Macrobe thus depicts himself as an expert in words that he calls "fleurs nées de la culture du réalisme et du naturalisme," (21) and specifies that his book contains the results of a "cueillette dans les mauvais lieux" (22). If Delvau compares himself to an entomologist, and Macrobe to a botanist, Virmaître takes on the medium of realist art par excellence in calling himself a photographer (xxii). However, in doing so, he also compares his work on the *Dictionnaire d'argot fin-de-siècle* to that of a "vidangeur," a person who cleaned out the city's cesspits before the modernization of the sewer system began in the 1880's (xxii). Poet Léo Trézenik, who wrote an introduction to Virmaître's book, indeed praises the author who "a rapporté de cette ballade de touriste dans le tréfonds de Paris, tout une œuvre d'un arôme spécial" (xvi). In short, while the imagery these authors use to talk about their lexicological methods has them cataloguing parasites and wallowing in the mire, they do so as modern professionals; the words in their collections, removed from their origins, are rendered harmless, odorless, and unsexed (that is, universal *qua* male) thanks to the expertise of the authors.

This expertise is largely guaranteed by the authors' positions in the literary field. The "coins ténébreux" Delvau described were books: "Ravageur littéraire, j'ai obscurément, pendant sept ou huit ans, battu de mon crochet..." (iii-vi). For his part, Rigaud claims to have personally heard all the words in his 1878 dictionary in the street: "Nous avons recueilli, avec soin, un peu partout, les éléments de ce livre : dans la rue, dans les ateliers, à la caserne, au théâtre, dans les

endroits les plus gais et dans les lieux les plus sinistres...” (xvii-xviii). However, this statement is slightly undermined by the extensive bibliography of his literary sources at the end. Virmaître, in 1894, also relies on this relationship between fiction and the methodology of the *argot* scholar. He maintains that, if his style seems less Academic than dictionaries by Rigaud, Delvau and Larchey, it is because his observations are more direct: “l’argot ne s’étudie pas dans les livres, il s’étudie dans les rues [...] je ne cite personne parce que, je le répète, c’est le peuple qui est l’auteur de tous les mots d’argot en usage” (xx-xxii). Yet, his work is targeted at a very bourgeois readership: the statements concerning his methodology seem more about producing himself as an author of books for people who enjoy reading about popular Paris than about respecting *le peuple*.²¹ On the opposite end of the spectrum from Virmaître, Macrobe only includes citations from Naturalist books to illustrate the relatively small number of terms in his dictionary. Taken individually, these methodologies just seem idiosyncratic. Seen together, however, they produce *argot* as an object of study exclusive to writers and readers of novels that are deemed unsuitable for women readers.

The literariness of the authors of slang dictionaries in the second half of the century is echoed in the rhetorical devices they use for depicting their relationship to slang. Not all of them fall under the aegis of scientific or professional interest. They do, however, establish social and sexual difference between the author and the language (if not its speakers). Take, for example, the personification that appears in several prefaces, including those in Vidocq’s *Les Voleurs* (1836) and Rigaud’s *Dictionnaire du jargon parisien* (1878). In his description of *argot*, Vidocq begins by praising the originality of argot-speakers, but finishes by expressing concern about

²¹ His book opens with a list of the other accounts of popular Paris he has written under the heading “Paris-Documentaire,” followed by a dedication to journalist Francisque Sarcey, known for his anti-intellectual, bourgeois taste in literature and theatre, and a reply from Sarcey accepting the dedication. There is then the preface by Trézenik, who praises Virmaître and evokes his *oeuvre*: “Virmaître est plus qu’un écrivain documentaire, c’est le Document lui même” (xvi).

how use of their vocabulary has spread by describing the ability of the language itself to break in to other parts of society: “La langue [...] semble aujourd’hui être arrivée à son apogée ; elle n’est plus seulement celle des tavernes et des mauvais lieux, elle est aussi celle des théâtres ; encore quelques pas et l’entrée des salons lui sera permise” (13). There is an ambiguity—most likely unintentional, but present nonetheless—in the pronoun “elle” referring to “la langue”: not only is slang the language heard in taverns, brothels, and theatres; it is equated with the women found there. The steps that this anthropomorphized language threaten to take into the *salon* make slang a *courtisane*: an actress from the dregs of society who ends up in the highest social circles.

In addition to the anxiety surrounding the *courtisane*’s ability to pass, unnoticed, in social circles in which she does not belong, the personification of slang also carries with it the threat of a break-down of social order that a loss of linguistic distinction could reflect (or produce). Forty years after Vidocq, Rigaud confirms slang’s ubiquity in his preface:

Le jargon parisien est ce langage étrange, libre d’allures, tantôt sombre et bref, tantôt imagé et plaisant, tantôt masqué comme Arlequin, comme lui habillé de pièces et de morceaux, qui court les rues et se recrute dans la rue, dans les prisons, dans l’échoppe, à la boutique, au comptoir, à l’atelier, à la caserne, à l’école, au théâtre, chez les artistes et chez les gens de lettres, chez les banquiers et chez les banquistes. (v)

Here, the various types of slang specific to each of the above milieu—theatres, prisons, schools, commercial establishments of varying permanence, and artistic circles of varying repute—not only meet in the street, but are collapsed into one individual who frequents all these places.

While slang is not overtly compared to a public woman here, the image of a figure in disguise who eliminates the distinction between *banquier* and *banquiste*, between banker and charlatan,

does embody the same threat of engendering social degeneration that the *courtisane* Esther Gobseck posed in Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1847).²²

If this personification by Rigaud only suggests the *actrice-courtisane*, the citation at the beginning of this chapter—the passage from Delvau's 1867 dictionary—decidedly renders slang a woman: “ces expressions hardies, forcées de faire le trottoir, parce que sans domicile légal, [doivent avoir] des séductions, des irrésistibilités que n'ont pas les mots de la langue officielle” (ix). Now, female imagery attributed to language is not original. In the eighteenth century, Voltaire had famously advocated for the admission of new words to the lexicon by referring to standard French as a beggar woman: Larchey's preface, among others, cites a speech Voltaire purportedly made before the Académie in which he said, “Notre langue [...] est une pauvre gueuse fière” (1861, xiii).²³

A century after Voltaire, however, it is slang, not standard French, that is soliciting on the streets. This complicates things. The words in Delvau's dictionary are—like Voltaire's native tongue—poor and in need of alms. But slang terms are also vagabonds: they are in the city, but being *sans domicile légal*, they were not “at home” there. Delvau implies they were unjustly banned from the shelter of the Académie's official dictionary. These words may merit some protection, such as Delvau's work offers. And yet, due to the traces that remain of slang's historical origins outside city walls, the words *sans domicile légal* are not only terms associated with the lower classes, but they may also be the language of nomadic foreigners: gypsies, or

²² See chapter two in this dissertation, as well as the chapter “Cashing in on Hearts of Gold: Balzac and Sue,” in Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-century France*. Durham: Duke UP, 1989.

²³ While I am not sure about the veracity of Larchey's account, Voltaire was a fierce critic of linguistic purism, and did refer to French as “une gueuse” in his letter to King Frederic of Prussia, August 31, 1749: “Je roule aussi des projets dans ma tête, pour donner plus de force et d'énergie à notre langue, et je pense que si Votre Majesté voulait m'aider, nous pourrions faire l'aumône à cette langue française, cette gueuse pincée et dédaigneuse qui se complait dans son indigence.”

Jews like Esther. This makes the meaning of “domicile” ambiguous: is it just a house, or is it a home country? Like Esther, *argot* is seductive, irresistible, and brazen enough to “pick up” more than one or two worthy writers. Delvau confirms that vulgar language is alluring, but, in the same breath, he also confirms that, for this reason, it is also dangerous. In addition to evoking the century’s growing concern for public hygiene, and social degeneration, Delvau’s personification of slang, his opposition of the “expressions hardies” to the pure, equally feminized, official language, layers on an element of familial—if not racial—impurity.

We have thus seen, so far, that while the prefaces of several *dictionnaires d’argot* in the first half of the century equated *argot* directly with prostitutes, with whom it was metonymous, in the second half of the century, the relationship between vulgar language and venal women becomes more figurative. It is important to note that this figurative representation changes over time, just as the fictional representations of prostitutes emphasize different aspects of the trope at different points in the century. In the preface to the 1861 edition of his dictionary, Rigaud evokes a familiar prostitution narrative: the one about the innocent young woman forced into prostitution upon her arrival in the city. If this language, contained within city walls, had been excluded from official dictionaries, he argues, it was not, as Delvau had suggested, because the *Académie* rejected them; it was because the words themselves were like honest, working class women who had been thrust into public circulation, against their will, by writers. The Rigaud of 1861 playfully attributes an innocence or naiveté to the actress-slang finding itself in circulation: “...des mots [...] venus, dit-on, on ne sait d’où, qui après avoir trainé dans la rue, dans les ateliers, sont tout étonnés, sur leurs vieux jours, de faire leur apparition et sur scène, apportés par quelque joyeux vaudevilliste, et autour des tables des cabarets à la mode, acclimatés par d’aimables viveurs...” (xii). He later implies that playwrights are to blame for pimping out

language that would have preferred to stay out of the limelight. The feminization of slang is subtle, but the narrative of an actress being “made” is much more common than that of a male actor.

Elsewhere in the same preface, Rigaud attributes to slang a fall from ideal femininity that equates circulating in public to a shameful, forced disrobing: “Lui qui voulait demeurer voilé comme la statue d’Isis, il vit ses voiles arrachés, ses secrets et son *génie* livrés aux profanes” (viii). His point, of course, is that unworthy authors are guilty of spoiling the pure beauty of this secretive language by publishing it. The effect, however, of equating realist literature that uses *argot* with the indiscriminate exposure of Isis—the Egyptian goddess and ideal mother and wife—is to interweave the use of slang in writing with the bourgeois gender dynamics of separate spheres: public masculinity and private femininity. While men who use slang may be guilty of bad writing, in the logic of Rigaud’s defense of slang’s modesty, women who voluntarily enter the public sphere, who would publish any of their language, are stripped not only of their modesty, but of their claims to womanhood.

Later in the century, Rigaud’s sympathetic depiction of *argot* as a victimized naïve woman will be replaced by a mistrusting fascination with choice vocabulary, which reflects the trend in fiction to abandon the “heart of gold” aspect in the Naturalist representations of gritty, low-class prostitutes in novels and plays (see chapter four). In 1878, Rigaud describes slang as “termes étranges, souvent pittoresques, parfois très décolletés, qui, sous leurs formes multiples, courent les ateliers, les bureaux de rédaction, les théâtres, les casernes, pour tomber dans *L’Assommoir*, rebondir sur le trottoir, au milieu des filles et leurs satellites et, de là tout naturellement, circuler dans les maisons centrales et les bagnes” (i). Here, the vocabulary itself is not only suggestively “décolleté,” and metonymically associated with “des filles” but, like the

clandestine prostitutes who, by this part of the century, were outnumbering registered women living in *tolérances*, slang also changes form in order to move, unhindered, throughout city space, and passes effortlessly between high and low registers: falling into the pages of Zola before being spoken again out on the sidewalks.

It would appear that Rigaud attests here to a general acceptance of language that began amid a society of criminals and ended in the pages of a canonical author. But this acceptance is by no means lacking in anxiety. Perhaps for this reason, it appears entirely inscribed within the realm of the literary, and dependent on a hierarchy that kept women and members of the working class as objects.

Shifting authority

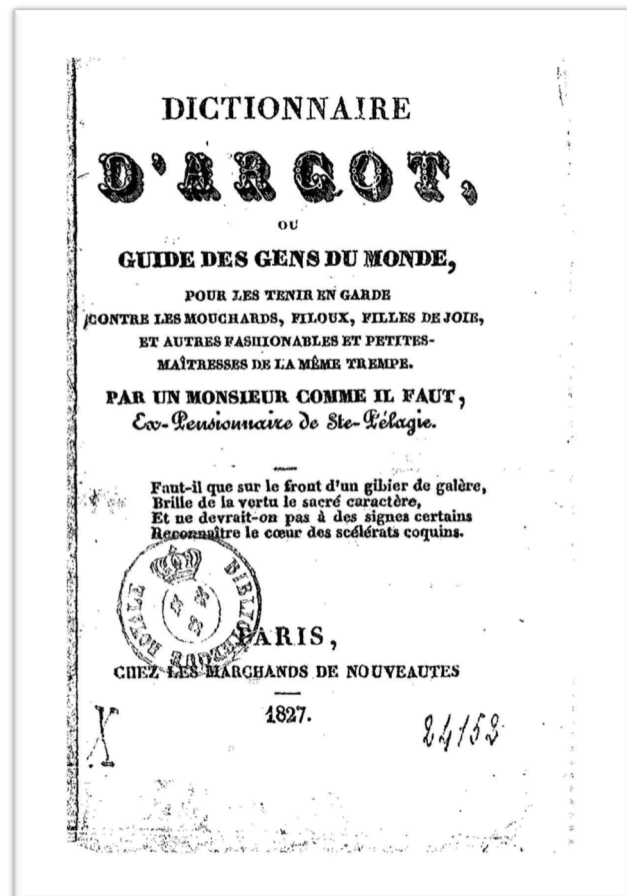
If, following the appearance of slang dictionaries in the 1820's, *argot* seemed to become suddenly “tolerated” within the realm of literary slumming at the beginning of the century, there was still resistance to offering it a place within central Parisian culture. We can see this resistance—and the responses to it by authors and publishers who sought to assure the sale of their product—by considering the dictionaries as art objects as well as texts. Momentarily, a name like Vidocq on the cover of a dictionary seemed sufficient to contain the criminality of the language between its covers. However, as science replaced the police as the source of social authority, the appearance of legitimate lexicological work replaced an affiliation with the right side of the law in the dictionaries’ depiction of their authors. By the end of the century, however, the masquerade of objectivity falls by the wayside: the slang dictionary circulates unabashedly as a commodity, reflecting its buyer as the sole legitimate authority over the value of its contents.

This progression is visible in the outward presentation of the book: the title and author, the publisher, the layout, etc. At first glance, a comparison of the dictionaries across the century seems to reveal a trend that moves slang from aesthetic margin to center: beginning in cheap, illicit guides, it would take its place in literature as well as legitimate linguistic studies, and end up in *livres de luxe*. While such a progression does fit with the self-democratization of art that Rancière imagines, I want to suggest that the evolution is more about economics than aesthetics.

The first two books under consideration, published during the Restoration, are an anonymously authored *Dictionnaire d'argot* (1827) [Figure 1] and *Le Nouveau dictionnaire d'argot* (1829) [Figure 2], attributed to a former prison guard who signs his preface “Bras-de-fer.” Both dictionaries were sold as “nouveauautés.” Products of the new organization of the print industry, novelty titles such as these allowed *éditeurs* to speculate on the public demand for literature.²⁴

The first *Dictionnaire d'argot* gives a lengthy alternate title: *Guide des gens du monde, pour les tenir en garde contre les mouchards, filous, filles de joie et autres fashionables et petites maîtresses de la même trempe* (1827). A number of typefaces are used, including a fanciful one for the word *argot*, both making it stand out and lending it a theatrical quality.

Figure 1



²⁴ Haynes (2007), p. 567

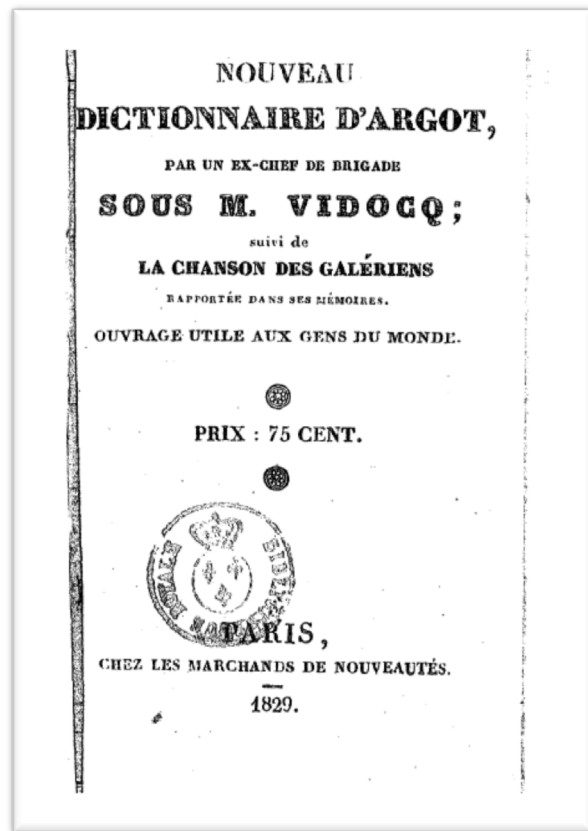
The author is indicated only as “un monsieur comme il faut, ex-pensionnaire de Ste-Pélagie.” The last part is in a cursive-style font, suggesting a signature: the author’s time in prison suffices as both his identity and guarantee of the work’s authenticity. Sainte-Pélagie was, at the time, part debtors prison, part reform school (for *correction paternelle*), with a considerable population of struggling writers; it had housed the marquis de Sade for two years, a fact perhaps not lost on the reader of a work the author of which claims to make up for what “les jeunes gens” would have learned in the past from *filles de joie*. The printer, “L’imprimerie de Guiraudet” is not listed on the title page, but on the back of the page. There is no single *librairie* indicated either; it is for sale “chez tous les marchands de nouveautés.” These things all make this book belong more to the category of the political pamphlet or the pornographic publication than a serious work of reference.

Small, comprised of exactly 50 pages, sized “in-32,” this was a fairly inexpensively-produced book, using only six full sheets of paper. Both its size and its stated purpose make it suggestive of a *vade mecum*: from the Latin for “go with me.” Since the Renaissance, these books were pocket-sized guides to various topics, but, precisely because of their size, they were also well-suited for pornographic material. This dictionary was clearly intended as entertainment: it also contained a loose-leaf page with the lyrics and music for a song using slang words contained in the book’s pages (this is missing from the copy at the Bibliothèque nationale de France). It would have thus appealed to a buyer with some disposable income and an interest in curiosities, but was not made for the wealthy bibliophile.

It must have sold fairly well, too, for another edition of an almost identical list of terms was published two years later under the title, *Le Nouveau dictionnaire d’argot* (1829). The preface claims this volume to be “augmenté d’un grand nombre de mots mis nouvellement en

usage”. The book is indeed longer than the 1827 volume—sixty-four pages—but the entries and one-to-one translations of slang words into standard French are mostly the same as those in the prior edition. The page layout of the pages is also the same. And while the title is shortened to simply *Nouveau dictionnaire d’argot*, the extended title of the 1827 dictionary (*Guide des gens du monde, pour les tenir en garde contre les mouchards, filous, filles de joie et autres fashionables et petites maîtresses de la même trempe*) appears cited in the 1829 volume’s short preface: by

Figure 2



studying this book, writes “Bras-de-fer” in concluding his “Avis,” the reader will learn to “se prémunir contre les voleurs, escrocs, filous, filles de joie et autre gens de la même trempe.”

The most notable difference is in the source of authority by which the *Nouveau dictionnaire d’argot* circulates. This lexicon is not attributed to a former prisoner, but is purportedly the work of “un ex-chef de brigade sous M. Vidocq,” whose name appears in bold, the same size typeface as the words *Dictionnaire d’argot*. The short preface is signed “Bras-de-Fer,” and even though it is a pseudonym, having some form of proper name as a signature lends the work a slight increase in legitimacy. The title page announces the inclusion of a song, which must have been a popular selling feature of the previous volume, given its removal. The song is listed as “La Chanson des galériens rapportée dans ses mémoires,” referring to E.-F. Vidocq’s

Mémoires, published in 1828. By thus evoking Vidocq twice on the title page, the author of the 1829 slang dictionary is clearly trying to capitalize on the popularity of the criminal-turned-hero and his widely-sold book. But additionally, changing the dictionary's guarantee of authority over non-standard language from the quasi-criminality of the 1827 volume's author to that of an agent of the law, this new edition moves the novelty slang dictionary one step closer to being a genre with legalistic claims to objective authority.

Les Voleurs, Physiologie de leurs mœurs et de leur langage (1837), the dictionary that circulated legitimately under Vidocq's name is closer to the contemporary vision of a dictionary, and thus appears more objective to today's reader. The entries indicate the part of speech (substantif, adjectif, etc.), and are followed by a definition rather than just a one-word correlative. And yet there is still a remarkable presence of the book's author beyond the limits of the preface, in the entries themselves, some of which are more like essays, spanning several pages in length: "Argot. Jargon des voleurs et des filous, qui n'est compris que par eux seuls; telle est du moins la définition du *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*. Cette définition ne me paraît pas exacte" (8-9). This first-person interjection could be justified by the fact that Vidocq's defense of argot appears under the entry *argot*, rather than in the preface, which is where it is found in all the dictionaries published after 1837.

But it is more than that: it is precisely the presence of Vidocq—as both character (reformed criminal turned renowned detective) and author—that made this book appealing, a fact the *éditeur* clearly used to his advantage. The title page underlines Vidocq's double authority over *argot* as both the "ex-chef de la police de sûreté," which appears under his name, and as an author: below his title is a short citation, attributed to "L'Auteur." The identity of the man behind the double signature is then confirmed a third time by an engraving of Vidocq. The presentation

of *Les Voleurs* indicates that this work, while very different in appearance from its predecessors, is still an object of primarily literary value. It claims to be a guide to the criminal world of Paris, aimed at an educated, but naive, reader: “Ouvrage qui dévoile les ruses de tous les fripons, et destiné à devenir le VADE MECUM de tous les honnêtes gens.” This label describing the book as a *vade mecum* conflicts with the format: the two volumes combined contain well over seven hundred pages. The claim to be the reader’s guide, under the guise of a “Physiologie,” thus combines to announce more of the thrilling stories of “fripons” that the fans of Vidocq, with his multiple ties to crime fiction, truly sought.

Through the middle part of the century, the slang dictionaries multiply in number, and a new approach to conferring authenticity arises. The 1849 *Nouveau dictionnaire complet du jargon de l’argot, ou le langage des voleurs dévolés* is most likely a revised edition of an anonymous 1847 work. The revision reveals the author, a poet and songwriter known as “Arthur Halbert d’Angers.” While this book is fanciful in its typography and engravings, and offers merely one-word *argot-français* equivalencies like the 1827 dictionary, the entries are more numerous than in earlier dictionaries, and are arranged for the first time in a two-column layout, which saves paper but also more closely resembles references for legitimate language. It also enters into what will become a schoolyard brawl over authenticity conducted in prefaces, claiming to be “[l’ouvrage] le plus complet qui ait été publié jusqu’à ce jour” (8).

Like *Les Voleurs*, the lexicon in this dictionary precedes a collection of songs using the slang and celebrating prison camaraderie, which is then followed by entertaining accounts of new ruses used by a cast of thieves and prostitutes (without getting caught!), the representation of which could serve either to make the crime easier to recognize or to commit. The “reasonable price” of the book also risks—or assures—its circulation among a less-discerning (read: newly

bourgeois) reading public. The lack, then, of a clear class distinction between writer, reader and subject matter troubles this dictionary's claims to be on the side of "morality" and indicates a gradual shift in the location of "morality" in the century's changing class structure.

A decade later, *argot* had an ever widening circulation amid the noise of the 1857 obscenity trials, as the recently-dubbed Realists' depictions of sexual and social deviance were attacked on the grounds of being either (or both) offensive to public decency and aesthetically lacking. It is significant that an "offense to public decency" was the same charge on which a working-class woman could be arrested for walking alone down a street at night, and jailed without any legal recourse. Perhaps as a result of such State power at the height of its ambiguously-located authority, or as a sign of it, a completely different approach to the lexicography of slang took over the market.

The authority to decode the vulgar language that was once guaranteed by the writer's acknowledged proximity to the criminal world was replaced—in part—by claims to scientific objectivity, and—in a larger and larger part—by his position within the literary marketplace. The 1858 *Excentricités de la langue française* is more akin to the *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* than to the 1827 *Dictionnaire d'argot*. It gives a brief definition of each word, followed by a citation or two of published works of fiction using it in context. The entries range from vocabulary brought into circulation by Balzac to terms dating from the previous century, illustrated by citations from Rétif de la Bretonne. This catalogue of words that were previously the currency of *les classes dangereuses* had become an object squarely situated at the intersection of philology and bibliophilia, two fields made exclusive to the native speakers of slang by education and money. Education and wealth, these formerly stable markers of the social

elite, had both become more readily available as a result of the democratizing effects of political and industrial revolutions.

Larchey, the author of *Les Excentricités*, was a librarian and archivist at the most institutional Bibliothèque Mazarine. He wrote in the preface to the 1859 second edition that the first edition had indeed been a “*publication de luxe*,” intended to test the interest of a rather limited readership. Almost all the one-hundred copies printed were quickly bought up, even at the “*de luxe*” price of five francs, making them instantly collectors editions worth almost twice that only a year later. Its distribution by the *Bureau de La Revue anecdotique*, a bi-monthly publication following select literary, theatrical and social events in Paris, further confirms the intended reader’s class and social milieu. The arrival of the slang dictionary in the exclusive circles of literary publication shows that the acquisition of “popular” language—if, and only if, it is not the reader’s *first* language—had been appropriated by the bourgeoisie as part of the socialization, education and possession of objects that make up what Pierre Bourdieu has called “cultural capital.”

Erudite, literary, and graced with a preface that includes not only citations but also footnotes, Delvau’s 1866 *Dictionnaire de la langue verte: argots Parisiens comparés* is the work of a prolific journalist and author already well-known for his titillating depictions of Parisian night-life. A fan of the dictionary format, or perhaps simply keen to gain from its profitable popularity and ease of production, Delvau was also responsible for the *Dictionnaire topographique, historique et étymologique des rues de Paris* in 1860 and the *Dictionnaire érotique moderne* in 1864. The imitation of the standard dictionary’s appearance (compare the following figures 3 and 4) underlines the argument he makes in his preface, that the language of the people is as pure as standard French.

Figure 4

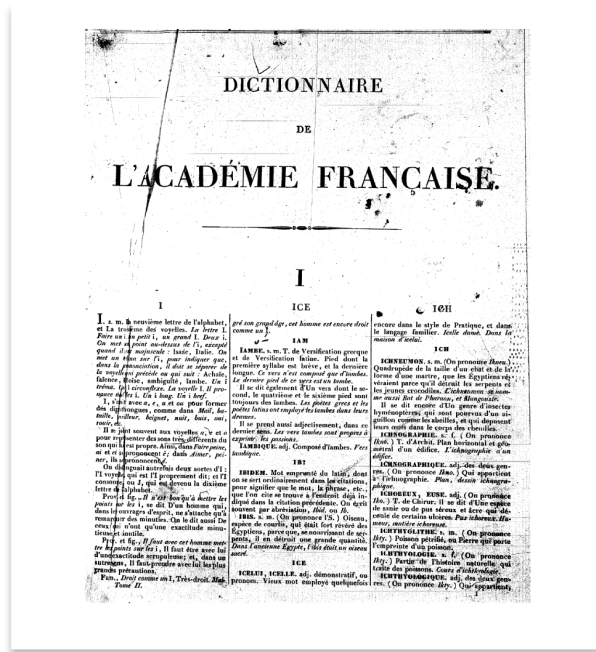
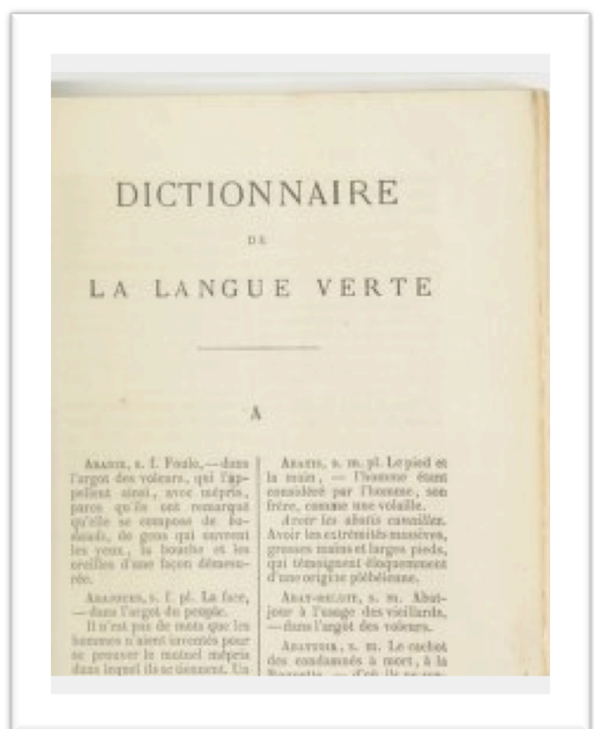


Figure 3



His slang dictionary was put out by the successful editor and printer, Édouard Dentu, who, according to the Goncourt brothers, did not shy away from scandalous publicity.²⁵ Delvau's editions are the product of a period characterized by high levels of involvement by State apparatuses: prostitution was under the watchful eye of doctors and the growing number of agents of the *bureau de mœurs*; literary censorship was still in the air.

Yet Delvau was far from being a lexicographer and etymologist, in the same vein as, his colleague Larchey, or, say, the formidable Émile Littré. Containment or treatment of linguistic pathology is not his aim. Selling books is. His other works include titillating and fanciful representations of venal women including *Les Cythères parisiennes*, and *Le grand et le petit*

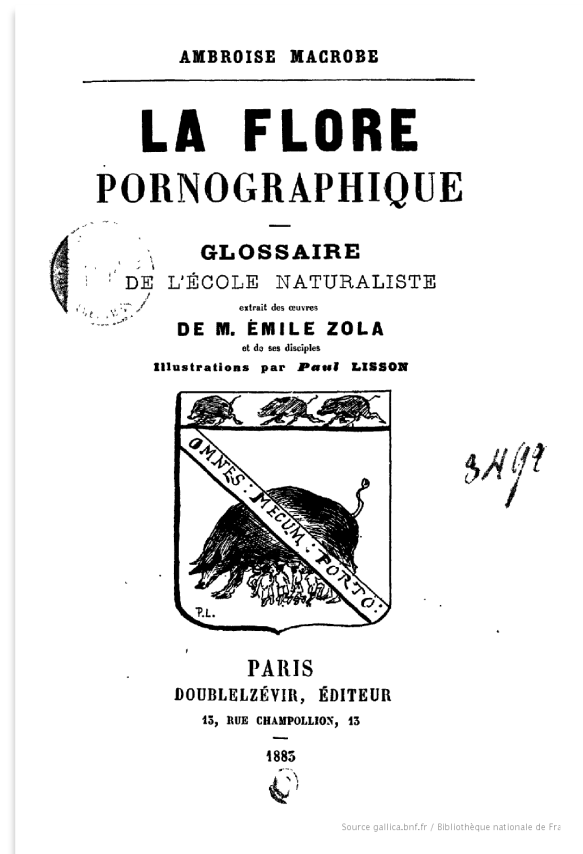
²⁵ See Jean-Yves Mollier, *L'Argent et les lettres. Histoire du capitalisme d'édition 1880-1920*, Paris, Fayard, 1988, chap. IX, p. 299-318.

trottoir, and *Les Mémoires d'une honnête fille*. He made his living depicting, and enabling, the escape from official control of prostitutes and vulgar language. As he wrote in the preface to his 1864 *Dictionnaire érotique*, “s’il [l’argot] vit en marge du Dictionnaire officiel, comme les gens qui le parlent vivent en marge de la société officielle, il n’en finira pas moins, à un moment donné, par se confondre comme eux dans la circulation générale” (xvii).

However, as we have seen, his valorization of the language is undone by his metaphorical rhetoric. Furthermore, the distribution of this dictionary by the *Librairie de la Société des Gens de lettres*, an exclusive group of writers, editors and bibliophiles, has the effect of making the “general circulation” in which slang may end up rather limited. This association was committed to advocating for the legal protection of literary property rights, and lining the pockets of its members.

The last dictionary that we will consider as a material object shows the trajectory toward what Rancière describes as the “aesthetic regime,” in which form takes precedent over content in defining a work of art as such. It is *La Flore pornographique*, edited and published in 1883 by “Ambroise Macrobe” (figure 5). This book should perhaps not really be considered a dictionary: it is, admittedly, a “glossary of the Naturalist school, extracted from the works of M. Émile Zola and his disciples.” However it also illustrates an interesting movement in the

Figure 5



relationship between prostitution and slang. Macrobe explains his eye-brow-raising title by referring to Rétif de la Bretonne's 1769 work *Le Pornographe*, in which the pornè-grapher is he who writes about prostitution. The "jardin pornographique," where he collected the terms for his glossary, does not contain any real-life prostitutes, but only those who write about them. This book is thus intended for a reader who is well-versed in arm-chair travels to the Parisian underbelly, but would not sully his shoes there. It was meant to appeal to a buyer who identified himself as a bibliophile. The author's choice to envelop depictions of gritty working-class prostitutes within a limited-edition luxury book suggests a will to disarm the uncontrollable, criminal, disease-inducing sexual desire for the female body with a combination of what Roland Barthes describes as desire for narrative mastery and consumer capitalist desire for the book as an art object. (I return to this in point in chapter four, on Huysmans' *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* and Edmond de Goncourt's *La Fille Élisa*, two *romans de la prostitution* sold as collectables.)

The title page of Macrobe's volume attests to its role as a humorous object of bibliophilic interest that exceeds its utility. It bears an assortment of typefaces reminiscent of the earlier dictionaries. We have also come full circle to a hidden author. Macrobe is the pseudonym of Antoine Laporte, a Parisian collector, bookseller and printer of luxury books. Just as the 1827 dictionary author's affiliation with the criminal world allowed him to translate between worlds, Macrobe's authority is based on his position within a literary, educated elite. The title page attributes the illustrations to Paul Lisson, a play on the word *polisson*, a term for a mischievous child. Everything about this book is artificial, making it a perfect artifact for the lexicon of the Naturalist school of writers, the members of which prized artifice above nature. The crest-like image bears an inscription in imitation Latin, *Omnes portum mecum*. While not legitimate Latin, it is easily understandable to say "I carry it all with me." This contrasts with the 1827 *vade*

mecum: this book is a marker of familiarity with an exclusive territory rather than a guide for the uninitiated.

Not only is the author a pseudonym, but the *éditeur* is also: Elzévir is the name of a particularly attractive Dutch typeface; Doublelélzévir suggests that the book's typeset and layout is a work of art. And it is: this dictionary contains only one to three terms per page, with decorative initial letters and frequent full-page engravings. The terms themselves are scarcely defined; the typography identifies that the most interesting part of the entry is the published work in which the word appears, making what was once the language of thieves and the working class something that now circulates exclusively in the self-referential world of literature.

The coded nature of slang that produced authors as knowledgeable ends up reinscribing the impossibility of its control into the depiction of themselves as legitimate authorities: it is hard to discern whether the numerous re-editions were an indication of the book's popularity or its inability to keep up with popular language. What began as an objectification of language in order to produce/affirm the superior knowing subject ends up exposing the commodification of the author as a figure whose own ability to flatten social hierarchy through his appeal to commercial desire can only be contained by an elite consumer and the ineffable aestheticization of language.

Conclusion: Defining and defying realist praxis

Dictionaries, like novels, are complex sites for the production of realism as the dominant cultural discourse. The prostitute as metaphor for argot thus exposes the deeper connection between dictionaries and works of realist fiction which routinely inserted slang terms into narrative in the purported interest of accurately depicting subjects previously excluded from art. As Schehr has shown, realism is often the source of its own undoing: it takes as "objects" entire

“material discourses, themselves codes, praxes, and semiotic systems, each of which has its own logics and illogics and each of which is only more or less translatable into the discourses of fictional narrative” (11-12).

If authors like Delvau, Larchey, Rigaud and Virmaître imply that the circulation of slang is difficult to trace, they nonetheless assure the reader of their prefaces that their dictionaries have succeeded in doing so. We have seen that the authors’ attempts to valorize slang collapse the distance between language and its speakers through metonymy or metaphor, ultimately reinscribing its social exclusion. Portraying slang with the attributes of the prostitute—language as a contagious flow of deception—positions the authors as experts (*qua* journalists) whose superior knowledge of writing and the public sphere puts them in charge of the circulation of *argot*. Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, the author of *De la prostitution à Paris* (1836), called prostitution, on several occasions, “a torrent that one cannot stop, but that is possible to direct” (Harsin 127). Directing, for the dictionary authors as well, was far preferable to stopping the torrent of language.

The slang lexicographers of the second half of the century seem to try to outdo one another in the distance they take from an Academic proscriptive rejection of *argot* as a source of neologisms. Larchey, in the preface to the second edition of his *Excentricités du langage français*, bemoans “les répugnances traditionnelles de l’Académie” (ix). In 1883, Macrobe cites Voltaire and Montaigne as well as Larchey who, in each new edition of his preface since 1865, retained the phrase insisting that his dictionary “[répond] au seul besoin de savoir ce qui se dit, —par opposition au besoin de savoir ce qui doit se dire.” (Macrobe 21; c.f. Larchey [1865] i). But perhaps the editor of the second edition of Delvau’s *Dictionnaire érotique* (1866) articulates the slang lexicographer’s animosity for linguistic purists and the Académie best: “Il faut un

dictionnaire pour comprendre les mots en usage; mais ne comptez pas sur celui de l'Académie, 6^{me} et dernière édition; MM. les académiciens n'ont pas assez de couilles pour avouer de pareils termes. Il faut quelques hommes d'esprit supérieur qui se dévouent" (vi). In short, slang dictionary authors pride themselves on not restricting the circulation of language.

This sort of "policing" is blatant in other dictionaries. Littré, for example, took up the analogy between poor speech and poor health in his book of common grammatical faults, published in 1880, *Pathologies verbales, ou Lésions de certains mots dans le cours de leur usage*. The authors seen here all claim to promote the circulation of language that would have made Littré shudder with horror. Thus, the authors of later slang dictionaries rightfully distance themselves from prescriptive lexicologists. They are not there to imprison *argot*, like those who policed its native speakers; they are not medical doctors, like Littré, who would quarantine bad words the way hospitals locked up prostitutes showing signs of venereal disease. And yet the metaphors discussed above directed the dictionary reader's view of the language (and its speakers) by transforming *argot* into a public woman: a source of pleasure only for those with the ability to pay. The authors do, therefore, occupy a singular position of authority that has an equivalent in the regulatory system. As writers who extracted this language from its origins, stripped it of all but the most minimal contextualizing narrative, juxtaposed it with slang from other parts of the city and other trades, framed it as a product for the voyeuristic enjoyment of bourgeois men (insisting it was not for women readers), and put it into the literary marketplace to be purchased for a wide range of prices. They are, in essence, pimps. Or brothel madams.

In conclusion, we must admit that the working class did indeed become more visible, politically, due to its inclusion as a subject for art, which included the presence of *argot* in fiction and popular slang dictionaries. And yet, as we have seen from studying the dictionary prefaces

discussed here, the shift from a metonymous relationship between *argot* and prostitutes to a metaphorical one effectively reduces working-class language to an object of bourgeois enjoyment. The very same objects that appear to legitimate *argot* simultaneously commodify it. And by affirming their authority over it, dictionary authors and editors place themselves in the position to control—and profit from—its circulation within the literary marketplace, to the exclusion of those who produce and use it outside this economy.

These slang dictionaries, sites of representation akin to the realist fictions alongside which they appeared, thus suggest that the kind of visibility that realism offered to working class subjects may actually make it harder for a formerly invisible figure to move out of the margins and into a position of legitimate (economic) subjectivity. Studying them, however, also reveals that representations of such figures do indicate shifts in the attitude of the dominant class toward not only the marginalized groups, but also toward its own control of the social order. For the dictionary authors, in spite of any claims to counter-discursivity, the control they attempt to exercise over slang is ultimately inseparable from the control of language openly sought by the Académie and similar State-authorized sources of power. Their claims to utility, morality and objectivity—as well as the frenetic issuing of supplement and revised editions—must be reconsidered in light of realist praxis as a means to dominate the literary marketplace. The inscription of slang in special dictionaries—just like the inscription of prostitutes in the prefectures' records—affords both author and reader a certain amount of mastery over the interpellated systems of art and economics in which the inscribed word (or woman) was permitted to appear in central Paris.

We have just seen how the figure of the prostitute plays a key role in these semi-literary works: it helps to establish the marginal as a subject of science as well as art, and produce the

writer's authority over language as analogous to male-dominated institutions' authority over prostituted women (law, science and the market). Here, the feminized, pathologized, commodified, prostitute represents the circulation of language as a product alienated from its producer. Because the lexical contents of these dictionaries are somewhat consistent from author to author, this genre allowed a condensed diachronic comparison of the trope, which is more complicated for narrative. My work shows how prostituted characters appear as both reading and/or writing *subjects* as well as exchangeable *objects* representative of some aspect of the literary market: genius, intellectual property, critical distance. I therefore will now turn to the analogous use of the figure of the prostitute in novels to produce the author as a universal (male, bourgeois) subject. As we shall see, the trope of the prostitute—even as a subject—continues to affirm the power of the male author and reader over the production and consumption of realist literature.

CHAPTER TWO: BETWEEN *FILLE* AND *FEUILLETONISTE*: BALZAC, THE LITERARY CRISIS OF THE
LATE 1830S, AND THE GENDERING OF THE FICTIONAL WRITER

Urban prostitution and commercial publication routinely overlapped in the literary imagination in the early years of the July Monarchy. By 1836—the year that Honoré de Balzac wrote the first serialized novel in the daily paper *La Presse*—it had become customary to speak of the writer as a prostitute within the literary marketplace. This trope appears, for example, in the mocking portrait of the *feuilletoniste* (a writer understood at the time as simply a book and theatre critic) in the 1835 volume, *Nouveaux tableaux de Paris au XIXe siècle*: “Fille perdue, *feuilletoniste*, la distance peut se mesurer; l’une et l’autre appartiennent à qui paie, argent ou oripeaux, bijoux ou promesses, n’importe.”¹ This derisive comparison would have been intelligible to readers who had come to recognize the “fille perdue” as a type. This lower-class, uneducated, naïve young woman had come to Paris from the country to make her way, but, failing to do so, fell into the lowest form of prostitution: satisfying the sexual desires of any passer-by willing to pay. The point of the *tableau* is that the *feuilletoniste*, similarly desperate to make a living, would likewise forgo aesthetic judgment and write whatever any paying bookseller, theatre owner, or newspaper editor wanted to read. The common denominator was a degrading commodification of the individual: both journalism and prostitution were seen as distasteful forms of exchange in which self worth is negated by monetary value.

Balzac—perhaps, in part, as a result of his own experiences as both a *feuilletoniste* and a failed printing press entrepreneur—seemed to find that the shame inherent in both literary and sexual forms of commodification made prostitution, in any form, a powerful signifying object.

¹ Jacques Arago, “Les Feuilletonistes,” *Nouveau Tableau de Paris au XIXe siècle*, t. VII, Paris: Mme Charles-Bechet, 1835. p. 122.

Indeed, the author of *La Comédie humaine* spent much of his career concerned with the social reconfigurations effected by the rise of bourgeois capitalism.² I am solely concerned here, however, with Balzac's appropriation of the trope of the prostituted writer as it circulated in the context of the "literary crisis" of the late 1830s. The result of such a focus reveals, I believe, a surprising take on the *lieu commun* within his "oeuvre capital dans l'oeuvre," the novel *Illusions perdues* (published between 1837 and 1843) and its sequel, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (which also appeared, serially, between 1839 and 1847). As I will demonstrate, both novels affiliate writers with prostitutes (and vice versa) in order to address specific concerns that Balzac seems to have had about literary production in a modern capitalist world.

In the relevant volumes of these two novels, Balzac collapses the distance between journalist and prostitute by pairing Lucien, the poetically-minded protagonist, with the kept actress Coralie and the devastatingly stunning *courtisane*, Esther. At first glance, Lucien's similarity to these venal women seems merely to translate the trope (i.e. writer as prostitute) into narrative. However, as we shall see, Balzac also effectively reverses the analogy: he depicts the prostitute as a writer. The bidirectional metaphor invites us to investigate what is signified not only by the prostituted writer, but also by the writing prostitute. The short answer is this: at the time of the literary crisis in the late 1830s, Balzac's fictional depictions of both suggest that legitimate writing in the public sphere is already, and should remain, a distinctly masculine profession. This is defined negatively: the collapsed distance between the venal writer and the venal woman reveals a troubling—and distinctly feminized—failure to discern the difference

² In his whirlwind survey of an article on the ubiquity of prostitution throughout the *Comédie humaine*, Owen Heathcote writes that whatever its referent, prostitution as a metaphor carries with it such a negative value, a loss of ethics, that "venality in all its forms is condemned and deplored" (280). "Negative Equity? The Representation of Prostitution and the Prostitution of Representation in Balzac," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 11.3 (2004), 279-290. A more thorough investigation of the complex relationship between sexual and commercial desires, and their impact on Balzac's narrative strategies in *La Comédie humaine* appears in Armine Mortimer's *For Love or for Money: Balzac's Rhetorical Realism*, Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2011.

between *oripeaux* and *argent*, between style and substance. In the portrait of the commercial writer in the *Nouveaux Tableaux de Paris*, the parallel construction distinguishing between *fille* and *feuilletoniste* disintegrates into an unstable jumble of circulating forms of indistinct capital: *argent* (both silver and money), *oripeaux* (fool's gold, or costume jewelry, or rags), real jewels and false promises. While the syntactic obscurity may have been unintentional for the author of "Le Feuilletonist," I believe that similar confusion may have constituted a conscious rhetorical move on the part of Balzac.

In this chapter, I argue that Balzac's fictional representation of the literate prostitute constitutes his own particular response to the literary crisis of the mid to late 1830s. In this crisis there were two issues at stake: one was the commercialization of the profession, the second was the influx of women writers into the literary marketplace. Commercialization threatened to eradicate the line between style and substance, fiction and fact, expressions of legitimate aesthetic judgment and manipulative sales tactics. Women entering the literary profession threatened the clear divide between public and private spheres and, subsequently, between masculinity and femininity. The prostitute embodies both of these threats: her aesthetic beauty disguises a corrupting venality, and her public circulation troubles the fixity of separate spheres. In this way, anxieties about prostitution exemplify rising fears about social mobility and the failure of outward display to faithfully communicate both social status and moral standing.

In the first part of what follows, I situate the two volumes of Balzac's aforementioned works that came out between 1837 and 1839 within the historical and ideological context of what many writers experienced as a crisis period in the development of the literary market. The volumes' prefaces express the thoughts of a balzacian fictional character we can only refer to as "Balzac, the author." In the prefaces, this "Balzac" demonstrates a continuation of the author's

advocacy for the protection of intellectual property outside the pages of his fiction. I argue that, at the time, imagining literary genius as part of a system modeled on class hierarchy could offer someone like Balzac a means to control the chaotic circulation of writers and capital that resulted in the gender-neutral confusion of style with substance. However, as I subsequently demonstrate, the literary world within the novels these prefaces frame is organized in a class-based hierarchy that is, in fact, based on inherently gendered principles. This becomes most apparent when Balzac's depictions of reading and writing expose the proper woman to be indistinguishable from the prostitute: both, he implies, are at their best when they are exclusively consumers, in spite of any creative (productive) capacities they might possess. Consequently, Balzac's representation of the literate prostitute both feminizes and denigrates men who "prostitute" their writing in the commercial literary marketplace. It also effectively produces public writing as a practice that traces sexual transgression onto the body of the female writer who is necessarily incapable of the independent thought that Balzac associates uniquely with a moral masculine elite.

Noblesse oblige

By the time Honoré Balssa adopted the pen name of Honoré de Balzac in 1830, he was utterly disillusioned by all aspects of the literary market. He had already been an editor, a twice-bankrupt publisher, and an activist against policies aimed at silencing the presses.³ His return to writing full-time yielded only the precarious income of a criticized and commercially unsuccessful novelist. He was frustrated by the difficulties of making a living writing books, having seen meager returns on his time and effort: his first signed novel, the *Le Dernier Chouan*

³ For a concise summary of the political and economic situation at the time of Balzac's entrepreneurial involvement in printing and editing, see Jean-Yves Mollier's article "L'imprimerie et la librairie en France dans les années 1825-1830," in *Balzac imprimeur et défenseur du livre*, Paris: Éditions des Cendres, 1995. pp 17 – 38.

sold poorly and at a fraction of the expected price, which considerably reduced his net gain; he could not pay the bills with the long-term promissory notes he was given upon the publication of *Scènes de la vie privée*. In short, he had personally felt the alienating effects of the capitalist turn on the printing and selling of books.⁴

Yet the industry changes that bankrupted Balzac also presented both him and men like him—with talent but no family wealth or royal patronage to support them—a heretofore unimaginable opportunity to practice writing as a profession. The rise of the *éditeur*, a profession born of nineteenth-century publishing reform (described by Christine Haynes in *Lost Illusions. The politics of publishing in nineteenth-century France*) was important in this regard. For while some writers had been paid for their work in the eighteenth century, it was due in part to the emergence of *éditeurs* that writing became a viable profession, rather than the practice solely of those privileged by independent income or royal patronage.

Living in Paris, accumulating debt and negative reviews of his novels, young Balzac was, regardless, determined to succeed as a novelist: even if this required him to support himself as a journalist, writing reviews of other authors' works. In fact, he wrote exclusively for journals for a year and a half.⁵ These included publications critical of the newly-empowered bourgeoisie, such as *Le Voleur* and *La Mode*, both founded by the journalist and businessman Émile de Girardin. However, while working with Girardin, who would soon revolutionize the entire business of journalism, on *Le Feuilleton des journaux politiques* (a short-lived journal aimed at exposing booksellers' abuse of authors), Balzac had also seen sales figures take precedence over literary integrity.

⁴ See Roland Chollet's article, "Au nom du livre et de l'écrivain," in *Balzac, imprimeur et défenseur du livre*. Paris: Paris-Musées/Des Cendres, 1995. pp. 39 – 54.

⁵ For a thorough analysis of Balzac's writing during this period, see Rolland Chollet, *Balzac journaliste, le tournant de 1830*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1983.

In the first part of the nineteenth century, both the managers of commercial publications and *éditeurs* trading in literature introduced new methods to advertise and distribute their products. The introduction of *colporteurs*, who peddled books in the streets, and *cabinets de lecture*, where members could (for a fee) read the latest volumes, suggested an unsettling point of contact between an item previously reserved for a social elite and a cash commodity now changing hands in the public domain. More threatening still, however, were the solicited reviews of books that appeared in the newspapers. Thus, even before the appearance of the type of advertizing recognizable to twenty-first century readers, *éditeurs* began to pay journalists to promote novels in newspapers. In so doing, they put two of the most profitable products of the print industry—books and periodicals—in a turbulent love-hate relationship.⁶ The main concern remains that, in paying for the production of literary reviews, the opinions of publishing houses take precedence over the honorable assessments of independent thinkers.

As a result of his experiences with commercial writing, when he returned to his novelistic goals Balzac sought to set himself apart as an author (and producer of intellectual content) from the bourgeois capitalists who benefited from the labor of others (and particularly from the printers, booksellers, and *cabinets de lecture* who profited from simply handling his work). The author's decision in 1830 to permanently add the particle of nobility to his pen name was indicative of a new period in his life, and of a new position—shaped by his time as a journalist—from which he would offer his social critique in the years to follow. He felt that the artist should be recognized as a member of the social elite.

Thus, I argue that Balzac's adoption of the particle was not merely part of the expression of a critical, conservative, view of the July Monarchy and a distancing of himself from his

⁶ A detailed cultural history of the overlap between the literary and journalistic worlds (in the years leading up to the launch of the single-issue sale of *La Presse*) can be found in Marie-Ève Thériault, *Mosaïques. Être écrivain entre presse et roman (1829-1836)*, Paris: Champion (2003).

peasant family history. His anti-bohemian view of a new class of artist may help explain the contradiction that some critics find between the bourgeois ideology expressed by his narrative process and the monarchical political ideology his diegetic world seems to reproduce. For example, in his foundational work, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France*, Charles Bernheimer calls Balzac's equation of prostitution with capitalism in *Splendeurs et misères* a product of his "disillusioned lucidity." Bernheimer finds that "Balzac's great insight into the operations of a capitalist economy" is at odds with what he reads as a "beleaguered" commitment to "rigidly hierarchical class distinctions and behavioral codes" of the past (61). There is indeed a contradiction, but one that can be explained if we consider Balzac's investment in the war being waged over intellectual property in the print industry.⁷

Like the particle that he adds to his name, the language Balzac uses from 1830 on to advocate for authors' rights retains a note of nostalgia for the place of the artist in the Ancien Régime. However he uses the language to express a desire to move forward, not backward. He wanted the artistic elite to occupy a new place in society: one apart from, but no less on par with, the *nouveau riche* capitalists. In an article written for *Le Feuilleton des journaux politiques* and reprinted in *L'Universel*, Balzac acknowledges the shift to capitalism as the system supporting writers: he compares the sale of books to that of grain and describes reading as a need, not a luxury. He regrets merely the writer's loss of status—and bargaining power—in this system. The language of nobility appears in his call for a new system that would guarantee the author fair treatment: "la noblesse, pour un auteur, c'est 'de recevoir du public le prix de son oeuvre'" (Chollet [1995], 42).

⁷ The best account of the politics underlying this battle between liberal "cercles" and conservative guilds is found in Christine Haynes, *Lost Illusions* op. cit..

For the man who would henceforth circulate under the name Honoré *de* Balzac, this quest to claim legitimate nobility was not far removed from a desire to see the laws governing the book trade overhauled. Balzac wished to see the author in a position that would protect both his intellectual property and his right to profit from the “produit de l’âme”—should he so desire—just as much as did the printer who produced the object in which this product circulated, or the *cabinets de lecture* that provided the space in which the product could meet readers’ needs. This, however, was not the case in 1830. And six years later, as Balzac was penning Lucien’s Parisian experience, the commodification of the author, and the degradation of his labor, seemed to have gotten worse.

By 1837, the whole industry was in the midst of an identity crisis: the rapid expanse of the press had introduced new genres, and new rules for those that already existed.⁸ One anonymous journalist wrote in *L’Éclair, critique européenne*, “La littérature, qui devait être un sacerdoce, n’est trop souvent d’une industrie. [...] Les mêmes journaux qui ont sauvé la liberté, ont prostitué les arts et les lettres”.⁹ Consequently, while Balzac set his representation of the literary industry in the years leading up to the 1830 revolution, both *Illusions perdues*, and particularly the second volume, *Un grand homme de province à Paris* (published in 1839), are very much the products of this moment of crisis and the metaphor of the prostituted writer was emblematic of it.

At that time, Balzac was simultaneously working on both the volume depicting Lucien’s literary début in Paris and the account of his later return to that city, coupled with Esther

⁸ For an excellent discussion of the 1837 periodicals’ heated debate over the definition of the novel as a genre, see L. Cassandra Hamrick’s chapter, “La Crise d’identité littéraire en 1837 selon la presse périodique,” *Autour d’un cabinet de lecture*. Ed. Graham Falconer. Toronto: Centre d’Etudes du XIX^e siècle français, 2001. 68-90.

⁹ “État actuel de la critique,” *L’Éclair, critique européenne*, March 15, 1837. Qtd. in Hamrick, op. cit., 7.

Gobseck, a former prostitute known as La Torpille.¹⁰ In fact, the narrative of this couple's appearance in Paris was published first, in a fragment appropriately entitled *La Torpille*, in September of 1838.¹¹ A year later, in *Un grand homme*, Balzac depicts the Parisian commercial literary marketplace. There, he transforms the familiar comparison equating journalism to prostitution into an extended metaphor. Not only are newspapers called “lupanars de la pensée” (CH V: 328); the writers' involvement with—and similarity to—kept actresses effectively collapses any distance between *fille* and *feuilletoniste*. In *Splendeurs et misères*, Balzac seems to depart from the world of publication, turning instead to high-class prostitution: he juxtaposes a *courtisane*, a thief, an *arriviste*, and an investor to show the similarities between crime and lawful capitalist exchange.¹² As we shall see, however, the two novels also read as one extended portrait of the poetic mind prostituted by capitalism. Indeed, in his 1839 preface to the first edition of *Un grand homme* Balzac wrote, “Les mœurs du Journal constituent un de ces sujets immenses qui veulent plus d'un livre et plus d'une préface” (OC v. 5, 114).

The concurrent composition and revision of the volumes attests to the overlap of the journalist and the *courtisane* in the author's imagination (a topic to which we will return). Furthermore, putting the 1838 preface to *La Torpille* in dialogue with the preface to *Un grand homme* composed a year later, shows that Balzac had envisioned both the journalist and the *courtisane* in light of the debate over the commodification of the literary marketplace. Balzac's prefaces to both volumes condemn the ways in which a novelist's reputation had become

¹⁰ For more precise accounts of the composition, see the excellent genetic work done by Pierre Citron and Roland Chollet in their introductions to *Illusions perdues* and *Splendeurs et misères*, respectively, in the Pléiades edition of *La Comédie humaine* vols. V and VI.

¹¹ *La Torpille* was included in two-volume book, published by Werdet, as a fragment—unfinished by Balzac, then cut more by the editors—supposedly to round out the page count.

¹² This is the main argument of Charles Bernheimer's chapter “Cashing in on Hearts of Gold” in *Figures of Ill Repute* op. cit.

dependent upon reviews that were penned for money—reviews that may or may not reflect the true aesthetic merits of the work. The target of his critique, he insists, was not those who had spurned him particularly, but the general abuse of power over the lives of authors who are either lauded or lambasted by less-capable journalists.

And yet his position in this debate was not unbiased by his own experience as a recipient of less than complimentary reviews. In 1838, he says he understands that those who had been criticizing his works may have merely been paid to do so. However, sexual innuendos creep into his commentary, introducing a moralizing tone. At first, the journalists' willingness to promote the interests of their *éditeurs* degrades literature: "Cette mauvaise foi réduit la Critique à n'être que des querelles de boutiquier, ce qui déshonore la littérature" (xvii).¹³ Later in the preface, his earlier comprehension turns derisive, as he claims it is the critics themselves who have been reduced to venality:

Si l'auteur se permet de laver ici le linge sale de la librairie, de la littérature et du journalisme en pleine place publique, il le fait moins pour lui que pour bien des misères qu'il connaît, pour des gens qui l'ont injurié; mais l'injure leur donnait de quoi vivre, il la leur a pardonnée en gémissant de savoir d'aussi belles intelligences réduites à d'aussi laides actions. (xlvi)

The corruption of "belles intelligences" by their "laides actions," the exposure of which constitutes Balzac's public airing of dirty laundry, performs the familiar feminization and degradation of the critics, whom he refers to as "des misères" in this volume that would figure as the beginning of *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*.

¹³ This preface was not included in the Pléiade edition of *La Comédie humaine*. Citations refer to the volume published as *La Femme supérieure; La Maison Nucingen*. Paris: Werdet: 1838, vol II.

A year later, when the full text of *Un grand homme* appears, Balzac once again uses the novels' preface to articulate his professional concerns. However, the insulting tone he had taken toward literary critics in 1838 gives way to an insistence on his own moral superiority. This takes the form of paternal advising. Balzac frames his fictional depiction of the corruption that plagued the print industry as a cautionary tale, one meant to encourage an aspiring young writer to remain focused on the goal of “une noble et pure renommée” (CH V: 117). Such an aspiration is indicative of—and exclusively attainable by—the proper writer: he whose measure of talent is only outweighed by his labor and lawfulness, consisting of “la constance et la rectitude” (ibid).

Roland Chollet, the editor of volume V of the Pléiade edition, dismisses the desire for “une noble et pure renommée” as pure fiction, inapplicable to the work's characters and author alike: “Édifiante moralité qu'on demanderait en vain du livre. D'Arthez est bien loin de la renommée [...]. Nathan, Canalis sont peu ou prou des imposteurs. Quant à Balzac, si sa renommée est ‘noble et pure’ à ses yeux (et aux nôtres), elle était loin de l'être pour un lecteur de 1839” (note, 1136). Indeed, the author of the preface had already referred to the impact of critics and trials on his reputation. He could not pretend this was his goal. But by 1839, the renowned writer did not need anyone else to confer nobility on him; he had taken the path contrary to “rectitude,” chosen to disobey the rules of French society: the *arriviste* par excellence had simply authorized himself to circulate under a falsely noble name almost a decade before. He surely knew that any additional notoriety would have only contributed to the extent of the legacy of Honoré *de* Balzac.

However, in establishing “une noble et pure renommée” as an idealistic goal for any literary hopefuls among his readers, he begins the work of saving innocent young minds from moral corruption. This, he had articulated earlier in the preface, was the utility of the book to

follow: “ce livre empêchât-il seulement un jeune poète [...] de venir augmenter le nombre de damnés de l’enfer parisien [...] ce livre aurait fait une bonne action” (116). On one hand Balzac’s own “noble et pure renommée” seems tied to his power to protect young (male) poets from the corrupting influences of the Parisian literary milieu. On the other hand (and as importantly), the concerned, fatherly address may be related to a perceived threat to patriarchal order: *la femme auteur*.

It seems, at first, that the target audience for the words of wisdom offered by the *grand auteur* is a young, presumably male, poet who would identify with Lucien. Returning to the descriptors that I omitted from the sentence confirm this, and give us more information about this would-be Parisian: “un jeune poète, une belle âme, vivant au fond de la province, au milieu d’une famille aimée.” Indeed, this young, innocent writer is, like Lucien and the thousands of others moving to the capital, from the provinces. Balzac’s concerned warning thus appears partly motivated by self interest to dissuade this young person from joining the growing number of writers for hire, adding to the labor pool, and decreasing the value of any given writer to an *éditeur*. But this does not yet clearly point to a woman writer.

His evocation of the abandonment of the poet’s loving family by the writer, however does. Leaving the rural domestic sphere for the public, urban, city space constituted a greater breach for a woman in bourgeois gender norms. In the interest of his own job security, Balzac thus either insults a male reader by feminizing him, or scares a female reader by opposing venal urban Paris to appropriate feminine purity: I am inclined to believe it is the latter. Once arrived in Paris, this imagined writer would become one of those “damnés de l’enfer parisien qui se battent à coups d’encrier, se jettent à la tête leurs œuvres avortées, s’arrachent la fourche pour faner à l’envi l’un de l’autre les fleurs les plus délicates.” Surely, equating a would-be writer’s decision

to move to Paris with abortion, hair-pulling, and the petty acts involved in fanning the flames of jealousy, clearly depicts the dangers of such an undertaking in terms more damaging to a woman's reputation than a man's.

Thus, we can now see that when Balzac adds a particle to his name and advocates for a new kind of literary nobility, the author of *Illusions perdues* sought to distinguish himself from those for whom writing was merely a form of paid commercial labor. And we can see in the *noblesse oblige* protective attitude a desire to combat the influx of provincial, working-class men and women. But how could Balzac hope to distinguish himself from other Parisian writers who might threaten his position in the literary nobility? From novelists whose financial success could not be reduced to the result of venality?

Écriture féminine ?

In the 1830s, the works of George Sand dominated the literary market. Try as he might, Balzac could not seem to surpass her in either critical acclaim or commercial success. Furthermore, as Margaret Cohen shows in *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Sand's renown represented the social reforms that increased the presence of women novelists with whom Balzac was competing for a share of the market. Women novelists were a frequent target of criticism in the literary debates of the late 1830's. Cohen adeptly demonstrates that this is because of the ways in which the genre that would become the realist novel developed over the course of the decade. Balzac, she writes, takes "a position against [the sentimental novel,] realism's major poetic competition throughout the July Monarchy for how the novel should pursue literature's engagement with public life" (181).

The sentimental novel was a genre produced predominantly by women and was widely popular at the time. And yet today, novels by female authors constitute a relatively small portion

of the nineteenth-century French literary canon. This is not an accident. Drawing on the work of feminist scholars including Christine Planté, Geneviève Fraisse and Joan Wallach Scott, Cohen summarizes the threat that the *femme auteur*—educated, employed and influential—represented to both the separation of gendered spheres and the subordination of second-class citizens in the labor market (169). In addition to critiquing the literary value of the sentimental novel, and undermining women authors' contributions to literary history, male novelists reimagined the entire profession of writing.¹⁴ Gendering the literary profession as male was, thus, supported by and implicated in the development of capitalism as a patriarchal heteronormative system.

Since this system was still unstable, male novelists, including Balzac, must have perceived intelligent, commanding public figures like George Sand as a threat not only to their professional success but also to their rightful place in the public sphere. I argue that this threat partly motivated the ubiquitous representation of venal women in novels. Now, I am not suggesting that prostitutes were meant to be read *à clé* as women authors. However, I suspect that the power manifested in narrative control over them had echoes beyond the covers of the book. In other words, I essentially agree with Charles Bernheimer that the point of novels about prostitutes was the demonstration of narrative mastery; however, I propose that the way in which this mastery was achieved had as much to do with controlling women's cultural literacy as it did with containing their sexual desires.

I will now turn to my second argument: that Balzac's fictional depictions of these two as representative of Parisian literary industry indirectly traces sexual transgression onto the figure of *la femme auteur*. If the literary profession itself were indeed the site of an immoral, corrupt, diseased, wounded existence, any self-respecting proper woman would only naturally be

¹⁴ This argument is akin to the one Bonnie Smith makes about the gendering of historical writing in *The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

expected to voluntarily remove herself from it. So let us now move into that world of the print market as it appears, fictionalized, in the novels themselves.

In the 1820s Paris in which *Illusions perdues* is set, it seems unquestionable that women shared power over the circulation of cultural capital. When Lucien arrives in the city, at the beginning of *Un grand homme de province à Paris*, Mme d'Espard's salon represents *le monde* that he will aspire to enter. This world, where literature and politics rub elbows, includes M. de Canalis' friend, "l'auteur d'*Ourika*": the real author and duchess, Claire de Duras (OC V, 278). Her name seems to have slipped the narrator's mind. But it is another female literary character—one slightly more of Balzac's invention—who truly dazzles the newcomer: "une fille sublime, Mlle des Touches, si connue sous le nom de Camille Maupin, écrivain éminent, aussi grande par sa beauté que par un esprit supérieur, et dont le nom fut répété tout bas par les promeneurs et par les femmes" (271). To Lucien, Camille Maupin is pure poetry, and embodies the winning combination of intelligence and money that he lacks. In spite of his friends' urging, the young poet never proves to be a match for her romantically. Yet the wealthy *salonnière* reappears at the end of the volume, in the company of Lucien's other two faithful friends, Bianchon and D'Arthez. A *deus ex machina*, she generously gives Lucien the two-thousand francs that allow him to pay his debts and remain in Paris after Coralie's death.

Yet over the course of the volume, Mlle des Touches is treated differently than the other elite women. At the novel's conclusion, as at the beginning, her beauty is inseparable from her piercing intelligence: "Cette belle et sublime fille comprit tout" (549). Referring, both times, to the thirty year-old woman as a "fille" communicates, primarily, her status as an unmarried woman. However could the word perhaps be a double-entendre? Camille Maupin's ability to understand everything does lend her an air of sexual transgression. As a playwright—whose

ambiguous name, doubtless, evokes the ideal, gender-bending heroine of Théophile Gautier's 1835 novel, *Mlle de Maupin*—the female author is in fact referred to as “ce hermaphrodite littéraire” (542). And despite the fact that, as an heiress, she does not write for pay, her literary success is somewhat sullied, since it is attributed in part to Coralie's acting talents. The epithet “hermaphrodite” is also connected to her demise since her brilliance reportedly ends with the actress' death: “Coralie joua dans la pièce de Camille Maupin, et contribua beaucoup à ce succès de l'illustre hermaphrodite littéraire. La création de ce rôle fut la dernière étincelle de cette belle lampe” (542).

Editor Roland Chollet confirms that Mlle des Touches' character began as a fictionalization of Delphine de Girardin, Balzac's friend, and the business-savvy *salonnière*, essayist, playwright and author of *La Canne de M. de Balzac*. Balzac's readers would most likely have recognized Girardin in the wealth, social position and wit of Mlle des Touches, in spite of his having systematically erased her more recognizable features (1215). By removing not only her eye color from his fictional portrait, but also the accolades of her work by the *Académie*, along with Claire de Duras' name, Balzac finds a subtle way to write influential women authors off without writing them out entirely. He evokes them elliptically through references to *la femme comme il faut*: simultaneously understood as “the proper woman” and “the talented woman.”

To the 1839 collectively-authored work *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, Balzac contributed a portrait of “La Femme comme il faut”: the talented, proper woman. He combined this portrait with some other writing, and turned it into a *decameron*-style work, which he published in 1843. In this version of the sketch, Mlle des Touches appears. Her main contribution to the discussion is to ask if the woman author is a proper woman:

D'après le programme que vous venez de nous tracer, dit mademoiselle Des Touches à Emile Blondet, où classeriez-vous la femme-auteur ? Est-ce une femme comme il faut ? – Quand elle n'a pas de génie, c'est une femme comme il n'en faut pas, répondit Emile Blondet en accompagnant sa réponse d'un regard fin qui pouvait passer pour un éloge adressé franchement à Camille Maupin. (30)

According to the logic of Blondet (one of the dominant voices of the commercial literary sphere in *Illusions perdues*) the only thing distinguishing a woman author from an improper, marginalized woman is genius. While Blondet *almost* admits that Maupin possesses genius, this approval must not be separated from her classification as a hermaphrodite. True literary genius, as we will see, is exclusively masculine.

There are two logical conclusions one would draw from Blondet's cryptic answer. First, any other woman who fancied herself a novelist and sought to publish her work could be seen as transgressing against bourgeois gender norms: either she lacked Maupin's genius and was, like Dinah in *La Muse du département*, gullible and unhappily married. Or, if she could lay claim to literary genius, she could still be seen as improper for circulating—in a rather unfeminine fashion—in an exclusively masculine sphere. The second possible conclusion is this: if Maupin truly is a *femme comme il faut*, then perhaps her genius lies not in her literary talent. To recall her spectacular entrance in *Illusions perdues*, she was described as “aussi grande par sa beauté que par un esprit supérieur.” Indeed, in “La femme comme il faut,” Balzac writes: “Pour être femme comme il faut, il n'est pas nécessaire d'avoir de l'esprit, mais il est impossible de l'être sans beaucoup de goût” (59). He would add to this, in *Autre étude de femme*, “en France, avoir du goût, c'est avoir plus que de l'esprit” (26).

Indeed, talent, for the *femme comme il faut*, is in the mastery of appearances. If it is difficult, at first reading, to determine whether *la femme comme il faut* is a legitimate member of Parisian society or a member of *le demi-monde*, it is because she is primarily defined by a comportment that privileges style over substance. In addition to her elegance in fashion, *la femme comme il faut* speaks in a manner that only reproduces the superficiality of her physical beauty. In this, says Blondet, she resembles the kind of popular fiction that Balzac despised:

L'esprit de cette femme est le triomphe d'un art tout plastique, reprit Blondet. Vous ne saurez pas ce qu'elle a dit, mais vous serez charmé. Elle aura hoché la tête, ou gentiment haussé ses blanches épaules, elle aura doré une phrase insignifiante par le sourire d'une petite moue charmante, ou a mis l'épigramme de Voltaire dans un *hein* ! dans un *ah* ! dans un *et donc* ! [...] C'est des grandeurs artificielles obtenues par des petites superlatives" (CH IV, PP)

Her self-expression is that of pure surface. Her talent is limited to her body: clothing it or moving it. Even in her speech, it is not the content of her communication that charms her listener so much as the way she communicates it. She is the embodiment of style without substance.

Furthermore, that style is citational. If she expresses the wit of Voltaire with a *hein!*, it is not as much an indication of her Enlightened mind as a reflection of her interlocutor's intelligence.

Voltaire's riddles only made sense to an exceptionally literate, and creative reader. Ultimately, if "grandeurs artificielles" are the signs under which the talented, intelligent *femme comme il faut* circulates, her body, mind and self-expression are mere reproductions of her male company.

Both the *courtisane*'s appeal to upper-class men *and* the anxiety she evokes stem from her deceptive resemblance to "proper" women: at the masquerade ball in the dramatic opening scene of *La Torpille*, the successful arriviste Eugène de Rastignac mistakes Esther for Mme de

Sérizy, a “femme comme il faut” (443). The *courtisane* is also a reflection of men’s desire.

While sexual desire is seen as potentially dangerous, the insatiable desire for wealth and status is the power driving the new bourgeois capitalist order. As Christopher Prendergast explains in *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* ‘courtisane’ is not the same as prostitute. [...T]he ‘courtisane’ is in part a moralized image, an expression of anxiety. But it is also an image connoting glamour, excitement, the great cosmetic game of leisure and pleasure in the modern city, part of the normal apparatus of civilized ‘commerce.’ (137)

Bernheimer takes up the anxiety that the confusion of a *courtisane* with a proper woman represents: he begins by asking whether Balzac’s depiction of prostitutes might have served as a site of resistance to the perceived loss of social distance. “The courtesan’s refined talent as an actress, her ability to disguise her venality and control the signs of her sexual availability, terrifies [Parent-Duchâtlet], whereas Balzac finds this metamorphic capacity eminently novelistic.” (34). Bernheimer thus considers briefly that Balzac may have found it productive to underscore a resemblance between the Romantic view of prostitution and the creative work of an author. However, he then promptly dismisses this possibility, arguing—correctly—that the narrative of *Splendeurs et Misères* evokes Esther Gobseck, the beautiful prostitute in love with Lucien, “only the better to bring disciplinary energies against her disintegrative threat” (39).

For Bernheimer, the central threat is “female sexuality” writ large, which is one of very few points in this intelligent work that could stand to be reconsidered, as it witnesses to the strong psychoanalytic bent of literary criticism in the 1990s. I generally agree with his conclusion that the novel’s depiction of Vautrin’s control of Esther’s sexuality offers a view of how Balzac coopts to his view of authorship the liquidity of signs—the collapse of distance—on which capitalist society depends, even as he remains distrusting of its tendency toward

degeneration.¹⁵ Yet, in locating the degenerative threat of the venal woman *solely* in her role as a phantasmatic object of male desire, Bernheimer actually erases a difference of significant importance in the late 1830's: while Vautrin is indeed representative of the author's narrative energy, Esther is the one of the two who actually produces any writing. I would like to re-pose the question of the distance not only between *fille* and *feuilletoniste* but between *courtisane* and author.

Instead of asking immediately—in line with Bernheimer's model—whether Balzac's work resists or affirms the commodification of the writer, it is useful to simply consider for a moment Balzac's decision to expend at least two novels' worth of ink on the very juxtaposition. I am drawing here on a paradigm shift performed by queer theorists like Katheryn Stockton, who find that a search for resistance and/or subversion to a dominant discourse—regardless of whether the ultimate result is to affirm or deny it—risks precluding other, more useful, questions. In *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, Stockton reconsiders race and sexuality in through a lens of “debasement,” which, she writes, has often been read as a sign of marginality to a dominant discourse (24). She advocates asking, instead, what a literary text imagines could come of taking pleasure—sexual and/or aesthetic—in something like debasement. For our purposes, we might consider the identity-affirming pleasure in the degeneration or degradation that a balzacian “author” character might appear to undergo. This allows us to ask, as Stockton does, what occupying the position targeted by dominant shaming “produces, at certain moments, for those who actually undergo it, who, in a manner of speaking, practice it” (ibid). In light of this, I propose that novelists like Balzac found a certain productive delight and/or utility in owning the

¹⁵ “Vautrin takes over the [degenerative] powers ascribed to Esther's erotic body,” which, says Bernheimer, displaces “the erotic lure from the represented novelistic world [...] to the narrative function itself” (67).

degradation of their own career during the period of rapid technological, social and economic changes that they felt resulted in a “literary crisis.”

On the one hand, writing and promoting novels that established the novelist as a public figure who could wield narrative control over marginal, working-class, transgressive figures, like prostitutes and criminals produced the modern author as an artist who pushed the limits of prior aesthetic boundaries. This is part of what is going on: it is a shift in what Jacques Rancière calls the “aesthetic regime” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*: the nineteenth century realist novel, for example, was an unstable terrain out of which was born the “modernist regime, which defined art by its privileging of form over content. On the other hand, producing the modern author as a figure who moved among marginal, working-class, transgressive figures shaped the field in a more immediate way: doing so produced an image of the literary profession itself as a terrain that was more hazardous to women than to men. While this meant that some male writers would also be compared to the characters they depicted—accused, for example, of being prostituted themselves—such a comparison would ultimately be less harmful to a man’s reputation than to a woman’s.

What, then, is desired, and what is produced, by texts in which a professional writer such as Balzac overtly depicts commercial writing—his own profession—as a venal practice? While it is true that the novels identify journalism with prostitution, and prostitution with degradation/degeneration, it is also true that there is an identification of the prostitute with the writer—both introduced into the narrative from the outside by the use of the common metaphor and coming from within the story in the form of prostitutes who read and/or write. The “readerly pleasure” that Bernheimer takes in Balzac’s controlling narrative of control over the prostitute is

inseparable from the metaphor that situates the commercial writer in a position of prostitutional degradation.

Assuming that it *was*, in fact, productive for Balzac to underscore a resemblance between the view of prostitution as degradation and the creative work of an author, what did doing so produce? Two things. First, it produces literary genius as the sign of difference between the proper author and the venal one flooding and corrupting the market (*l'auteur qu'il ne faut pas*, if you will). Secondly, making the prostitute a writer points out that her journalist lover is not only similar to her in their labor (both sell themselves), but also in their mental capacity. Sitting with the degradation of a member of Balzac's profession is productive of a definition of the unsuccessful writer: the man who writes like a *courtisane*. This establishes a feminine mind—in lieu of venality—as the primary obstacle in the way of the *femme auteur*.

Why not just write scathing reviews of women novelists' works? Several critics, novelists and journalists did attack the figure of the *femme auteur* directly. Balzac, however, only wrote one novel doing so: *La Muse du département* depicts a woman writer who moves from the provinces to Paris, abandoning her domestic duties and her morals. It was poorly received, and accused of being petty and vindictive (Cohen 181). I maintain, therefore, that he redirected his desire to undermine women authors, and that it surfaces in his representation of the provincial male author and the literate venal woman.

In *Illusions perdues* and *Splendeurs et misères*, Balzac tries something different. Rather than depicting a male writer's command of the public sphere as superior to a woman writer's, he shows a male writer who fails: Lucien first fails to understand how the commercial literary market works, then he fails to master the command of life-as-fiction that is required to

successfully navigate the new capitalist social order. This failure, however, is pinned directly on his *courtisane*-like nature.

At the end of the first volume of *Illusions perdues* (published in 1836), Lucien leaves for Paris as a poet and novelist, and the protégé of a provincial noble. Half way through *Un grand homme de provinces à Paris*—and shortly after his decision to become a journalist—Lucien appears coupled with a prostitute (the kept actress, Coralie). However (at least to those who had already read *La Torpille*, which happens sequentially later, but was published earlier) when Lucien first arrives in Paris he has already—in the mind of both the author and his readers—been equated with the *courtisane*, Esther. In effect, his reputation is tarnished almost before he has begun.

Lucien de Rubempré's spectacular return to Paris is analogous to the arrival of a *grande courtisane* into bourgeois society. In the opening scene of *La Torpille*, Lucien circulates unmasked at a masquerade ball, the dazzling object of every eye. While Lucien is looking for Esther (of whose venality he is not yet technically aware), everyone else is looking at him, appreciatively but analytically: Balzac's opening scene places at center stage the figure of the *flâneur* who looks without buying, and, moreover, can even be seen as “merchandise” in Walter Benjamin's view (42).

Like the *courtisane*, the instability of Lucien's class is immediately readable on the very allure of his body: “Quoique sa beauté le classât parmi ces personnages exceptionnels qui viennent au bal de l'Opéra pour y avoir une aventure [...], il paraissait bourgeoisement sûr de sa soirée” (CH VI, 430). As Laure Katsaros argues in *Un Nouveau monde amoureux: célibataire et prostituées au XIXe siècle*, a study of the analogous social position occupied by single men and

public women, the dandy is simultaneously emblematic of post-Revolutionary social instability and the production of a new societal structure founded on consumer capitalism.

And yet, the glamorous beauty of the young dandy is quickly perceived as a mask that blurs not only his provincial bourgeois origins but also covers the traces of his prior descent into the mire of Parisian society. Indeed, the narrator explains, beauty and youth can cover “de profonds abîmes,” but not for long.¹⁶ Lucien’s past is revealed by *une femme comme il faut* who summarizes the yet-unpublished account of his stint in Paris—his first failure to live out the *arriviste* plot—thus: “Quoi ! c’est ce fils d’apothicaire de qui elle [Mme du Châtelet] s’était amourachée, qui s’est fait journaliste, l’amant de Mlle Coralie?” (432).

If Lucien’s provincial bourgeois origins were immediately apparent in his manner, it is the trace of his Parisian adventures that constitute the “abîmes” referred to above. It is this experience that effectively lowers his proper social standing from that of the ambiguously-classed dandy fancied by a noble woman, to that of a journalist and an actress’ lover: the narrative later clarifies that Coralie had actually financially supported Lucien, making him doubly dependent on venal income. The loss of both moral and social standing is reflected by a literal descent into the streets of Paris, as is connoted by “abîmes.” If the apparent causality between a career in journalism and a relationship with an actress were not clear enough to conflate the two dubious professions, the equation of journalism with filth—particularly sewage—will align Lucien’s turn to commercial writing with the lowest form of sexual venality.

Balzac was familiar with *La Prostitution dans la ville de Paris* written in 1836 by Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, the public hygienist whose first project was a study of sewers; a similar mentality frames Parent-Duchâtelet’s recommendation to accept the presence of

¹⁶ In Paris, the narrator says, “il est une façon d’être qui révèle ce que vous êtes, ce que vous faites, d’où vous venez, et ce que vous voulez” (431).

prostitutes as a system of outlets for safely directing excess male desire away from the scene of proper bourgeois domesticity.¹⁷ While Balzac does not press on this metaphor as much as other authors (see chapter two), a few pages later, when Lucien greets some fellow writers, the equation of commercial writing with the filth of “the streets” is explicit: journalism is an underworld where “on y trempe,” where deals are made with “les plus fétides bassesses,” and where one must “salir les doigts” (437). True to his *courtisane*-esque initial appearance, whatever social interactions Lucien may undertake from this point forth in *Splendeurs et misères*, he has already been inextricably sullied—socially and morally—by his formation in the venal world of journalism. The journalist and venal woman are both “degraded”: they both are seen as the product of a lower class, which is synonymous with a base morality.

As readers of the first edition of *Un grand homme* published the following year would see, when Lucien becomes a journalist he necessarily prostitutes his literary talent. Representatives of the two seemingly opposing camps of writers that Lucien joins both equate writing for newspapers with an irreparable descent into sexual venality. Michel Chrestien, of the anti-commercial Cénacle, tells Lucien that he could never forgive the young poet should he decide to support himself by committing his pen to writing biased reviews of other artists’ hard work: he calls journalism “le parti pris de trafiquer de son âme, de son esprit et de sa pensée” (*CH V*: 328). Similarly, Etienne Lousteau, the commercial writer par excellence, admits to his own loss of purity as a result of becoming a critic whose pen is directed by the trivial business of the presses rather than higher artistic ideals: “Et j’étais bon ! J’avais le coeur pur : [...] Enfin,

¹⁷ For an extended analysis of the equation of prostitutes with sewers in *De la prostitution à Paris*, see Charles Bernheimer’s chapter on Parent-Duchâtelet’s work in *Figures of Ill Repute*, op. cit. and Jonathan Strauss’ more recent work, *Human Remains: Medicine, Death, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, New York: Fordham UP, 2012.

pour un exemplaire refusé par le libraire à mon journal, je dis du mal d'un livre que je trouve beau!" (344). An innocent writer's purity of heart, soul and mind would be lost forever at the moment a price is put on it in the dank, immoral world of journalism.

The irreversible commodification of Lucien, the inevitable outcome of his stated attempt to "triumph" as a journalist (348), is confirmed by the response to his début theatre review: "je suis obligé de vous dire tout simplement que vous êtes un homme d'esprit, de coeur et de style," says Blondet; but the immediate reply of the newspaper editor Adroche Finot is telling: "Monsieur est du Journal, dit Finot en remerciant Étienne et lui jetant le fin regard de l'exploitateur" (400). By accepting Lousteau's introduction into the world of journalism, the man of wit, heart and style becomes the property of the newspaper. What Lucien had expected to be an apprenticeship is, in fact (and had been from the beginning), pure exploitation.

This "formation as degradation" makes Lucien all the more similar to the *courtisane* whom he was seeking at the beginning of *La Torpille*. We learn from those watching Lucien that he returned to Paris accompanied by Esther Gobseck, the equally mesmerizing young woman who had become known as "La Torpille," for her ability to swiftly inflame the desires any man she meets. Like Lucien, however, her elegance fails to cover her past, at least to those in the know. The onlookers agree that she began as a typical *fille perdue*. Blondet attributes her fall to her early formation in the theatre world as a "rat," defined as "un enfant de dix à onze ans, comparse à quelque théâtre [...] que les débauches formaient pour le vice et l'infamie [...] une espèce de page infernal, un gamin femelle à qui se pardonnaient les bons tours" (*CH VI*, 440).

From this exploitation to the next, it was only a matter of time before the young person (of uncertain or unstable gender) became a "fille de joie." Her beauty is thus, like Lucien's,

purely theatrical; and, also like Lucien's, covers her inextricable association with filth: Esther, says Finot, "a barboté dans la rue, [...] a roulé dans la fange" (441).

Yet, as the daughter of a Jewish money-lender and a prostitute, Esther's other onlookers add, she was, in fact, born lost to society and morality.¹⁸ Therefore, if Esther was destined from birth to embody the most socially unacceptable forms of exchange, her contact with the theatre world only enabled her to do so effectively. The theatre taught the "gamin femelle" that femininity was an artifice, like any other: one to be manipulated in the interest of her tricks.

In mapping this aspect of the *courtisane* on to the journalist as well, we can now see that Lucien's "fall" from literary grace into journalism in *Un grand homme* is equally illusory. His infamous visit to the Galerie de Bois—the shared home of prostitution and book publication—proves that he actually prostitutes his own writing *before* turning to journalism, as Franc Schuerewegen has argued in his deconstruction of the supposed distance between literary manuscript and newspaper article:¹⁹

Lucien, si l'on peut dire, 'sollicite' un genre de transaction dont sa naïveté devrait le tenir à l'écart. 'Prostituant la Muse' [*CH* V, 365] parmi celles qui prostituent leur corps, le jeune homme sait vendre (*se vendre*) avant même que le mécanisme de la vente ne lui ait été expliqué. L'épisode des Galeries de Bois confirme donc [...] que le rapport entre manuscrit et authenticité artistique, celui-là étant l'emblème de celle-ci, s'avère somme toute douteux. (83)

¹⁸ For the relationship between prostitution and money lending, see Maurice Samuels, "Metaphors of Modernity: Prostitutes, Bankers, and Other Jews in Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*," *Romantic Review* 97.2 (2006): 169-84.

¹⁹ Franc Schuerewegen, "Le prix de la lettre. Réflexions axiologiques," *Balzac: Illusions perdues, l'oeuvre capitale dans l'oeuvre*, Ed. Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, Cahiers de recherches des instituts Néerlandais de langue et littérature françaises, vol. 18: 1988. Reprinted Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003.

If the manuscript is falsely pure, Schweregen argues, Lucien nonetheless parades the illusory innocence of his writing in much the same way that the *courtisane* treats femininity as an artifice. Lucien's behavior effectively reveals the possibility for venality, even in the world of novels and poetry.

Indeed, even before entering the Galeries de Bois, the Parisian site that compromised the virtue of both women and writers until 1830, Lucien had already viewed his work as a source of exchange value. In his letter to his sister, he reveals an exploitive attitude not unlike Finot's toward his works, assigning to both his novel and book of poetry a monetary value sufficient to, at the very least, clothe their author: "D'ici là j'aurais sans doute vendu *L'Archer de Charles IX* et *Les Marguerites*. N'ayez donc aucune inquiétude à mon sujet. Si le présent est froid, nu, mesquin, l'avenir est bleu, riche et splendide. La plupart des grands hommes ont éprouvé les vicissitudes qui m'affectent sans m'accabler" (*CH* V, 292-93). The future he envisions here, where his current nakedness is clothed by the splendid trappings of greatness, does—temporarily—become reality in the sequel to *Illusions perdues*... even if the *splendeurs* are the superficial ones of dandies and *courtisanes*.

At this point, then, we must return to Esther's story, the depiction of which reverses the metaphor of the prostituted journalist: now the *courtisane* is depicted as a member of the intellectual elite. If Lucien's journalism constitutes as false a loss of artistic merit as Esther's profession was a loss of innocence, their similarity reveals a fiction at the heart of the metaphor: that comparing the journalist to the prostitute works only in one direction. Ideally, the comparison would merely connote the degradation of the commodified writer. Balzac's use of it, however, also grants the venal woman a place in the literary world.

The following portrait of the *courtisane* by the journalist Blondet traces the story of the failed poet back onto the prostituted woman, mediated through the elegant appearance of *courtisane*: “Quelle perte irréparable fait l’élite de la littérature, de la science, de l’art et de la politique! dit Blondet. La Torpille est la seule fille de joie en qui s’est rencontrée l’étoffe d’une belle courtisane ; l’instruction ne l’avait pas gâtée, elle ne sait ni lire ni écrire : elle nous aurait compris” (440). Granted, given that Esther could neither read nor write, her membership in this elite society is as unfounded as Lucien’s appearance at the ball, where he circulates penniless among the rich.²⁰ And yet, the illiterate *courtisane* is paradoxically identified as the “ideal reader” of the writer, the scientist, the artist and the politician... though not necessarily of their works.

For Balzac’s journalist, Esther’s *inability* to read and write is, in fact, a guarantee of her potential proficiency with a different type of cultural literacy, and engagement in literary circles: “elle ne sait ni lire ni écrire : elle nous aurait compris. Nous aurions doté notre époque d’une de ces magnifiques figures aspasiennes sans lesquelles il n’y a pas de grand siècle” (440). In his *éloge* to the hypothetical Esther, the journalist Émile Blondet compares her to French *courtisanes* past who influenced patronage, and the muses of ancient poets. She would, in essence, support and inspire poetry, but not write it. He regrets the loss of a modern *salonnière*, evoking the literary debates of the mid 1830s through a reference to censorship and its paradoxical promotional power: “On aurait lu chez elle quelque chef-d’œuvre dramatique défendu qu’on aurait au besoin fait faire exprès” (441). This imaginary illiterate queen of a literary circle constitutes the ideal *salonnière* who harnesses the power of her sex appeal and social

²⁰ It is perhaps notable that the Galeries de Bois are compared to the *bal masqué* in *Un grand homme* (CH V, 360).

connections to promote writers and their work. While she does not appear in *Illusions perdues*, Blondet's portrait of Esther in this light establishes her link to the world of literary criticism.

Her illiteracy also serves as a placeholder for her sexual transgression, on which depends the *courtisane*'s place in Balzac's Paris and Blondet's imaginary salon. When Blondet says that "l'instruction ne l'avait pas gâtée, elle ne sait ni lire ni écrire," the idea that education would have "ruined" Esther in the journalist's view is more about morality than literacy. Her illiteracy should have been utterly unremarkable to her observers: it would have been extraordinary for a girl of her social standing to have received a primary education before 1836.²¹ Nevertheless, any "instruction" she might have received would have been, according to historian Roger Price, "based upon particular conceptions of womanhood, and on the functions of women within the family and community. For most of the century the dominant model was that of *la jeune fille chrétienne*, an idealization of the Virgin Mary, pious and modest" (319). While, on one hand, Blondet's appreciative depiction of Esther as a *salonnière* reads as a critique of the value of such religious education, on the other hand, it also casts a shadow of sexual transgression onto the modern *salonnière* who immodestly surrounds herself with public men, perhaps to the detriment of her family.

Through the collapse of Esther's illiteracy with her ability to understand and promote Blondet and his circle of intellectual elites, the journalist produces as the ideal *salonnière* a woman of poetic mind who, nevertheless, cannot participate in the creative work of the men she brings together. He also depicts a woman whose company is restricted to that of men, given her

²¹ Or after. It would take time to build the infrastructure initiated by the 1833 and 1836 Guizot laws aimed at providing primary education for boys, and then girls, in every commune across France. And while these laws included provisions to ensure access even to families unable to pay the *provision scolaire*, attendance remained generally low for all children of working-class families, and even lower for girls.

lack of initiation into—or rejection by—proper female society.²² Blondet's *salonnière* is thereby no less of a *courtisane*: if the latter exists to satisfy the sexual desires of the upper-class men who frequent her, his imaginative depiction of Esther produces the former as a woman whose purpose is the analogous satisfaction of the literary desire—or ambition—of the men in her circle.

If Blondet appreciates the fact that Esther had been spared religious instruction, Balzac offers his reader the following thought experiment: what happens when a *courtisane* is sent to “une maison célèbre par l'éducation aristocratique et religieuse qui s'y donne” (463)? While she does come out duly judgmental of her former life, Esther also demonstrates that a venal woman who grew up in the theatre is—as a blank slate *par excellence*—the ideal proper woman. At the convent, her body proves as malleable as a doll: “Esther possédait cette moyenne taille qui permet de faire d'une femme une sorte de joujou, de la prendre, quitter, reprendre et porter sans fatigue” (464). If her body is easily re-covered, her comportment is similarly open to revision. Her formation is, the narrator says, in part, an exercise in forgetting her past, as if her mind were in the hands of a student who erases the slate before writing something else.

If her past constituted a roll in the mire, once placed in a different social setting, her theater training actually makes Esther the perfect student of aristocratic manners: “Esther eut bientôt pris les manières, la douceur de voix, le port et les attitudes de ces filles si distinguées [...]. Ces femmes n'avaient jamais, dans leur carrière d'enseignement, rencontré naturel plus aimable, douceur plus chrétienne, modestie plus vraie, ni se grand désir d'apprendre” (467).

Vautrin confirms that her education had successfully produced (or reproduced) Esther as “une femme comme il faut.” This, he says, would allow Lucien to make an ideal *salonnière* of her

²² Blondet's description of Esther hereby recalls the description of the *femme supérieure* and woman author Dinah de la Baudraye in Balzac's 1837 novel *La Muse du département*: having driven away all the women of Sancerre with her preference for discussing only the latest developments in art, literature and science, she holds a salon populated mostly by men: “Dinah fut donc regardée comme monstreuse et dangereuse, et le désert se fit autour d'elle” (CH IV).

“Elle peut, elle doit devenir, sous l’empire de ton amour, une Ninon, une Marion de Lorme, une Dubarry, comme le disait ce journaliste à l’Opéra” (478-479). However, unlike these women, who all occupied a highly visible position in French society, and who used their education to write their own memoirs, the reformed, literate Esther will be sequestered in an apartment, unseen, for years, existing only for Lucien. She becomes the ideal domestic outlet for desires that could distract her man from successfully mastering the public sphere. In this role, however, she does actually bring to fruition Blondet’s fantasy of the illiterate *salonnière* who uses her wit to produce the men around her, and increase their market value, without creating any original literature-caliber writing of her own.

Esther is not technically illiterate. She learns to read and write at the religious school that Vautrin, under the guise of Herera, gets her admitted to. However, she uses literacy only to bring to life the product of a masculine imagination. In the very first letter she writes, Esther uses her newly-acquired literacy to represent herself as the embodiment of Lucien’s dream: the passionate mistress *and* the ideal proper woman. Writing to Vautrin, she paints a portrait of herself as virginal, faithfully in love with Lucien, and self-effacing: “j’emploie, pour la première fois, la faculté d’exprimer mes pensées [...] à peindre un amour que Lucien a peut-être oublié” (479). As a result of her catechesis, she sees herself as a receptive vessel: “La cérémonie d’hier a versé les trésors de la grâce en moi [...] et j’ai reçu le corps sacré de notre Sauveur” (ibid). Her citation of the biblical rhetoric confirms that her religious education had the effect of forming her in mid-century bourgeois ideals of maternity: the female body as a receptacle is both sanctified and in accordance with civic duty.²³

²³ For a discussion of the religious and civic rhetoric surrounding maternity as labor, sanctity and civic duty in nineteenth-century France, see Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Harvard U. P., 1996, chapter three.

Yet, even as Esther portrays herself as the product of female education that took the virgin Mary for a model, her writing reveals a trace of her original education in the theatre (or perhaps merely exposes the similarity of it to the best religious training): she depicts the celebration of baptism as a star theatrical performance: “En ce moment, [...] je n’étais plus une femme, je naissais à une vie de lumière, au milieu des acclamations de la terre, admirée par le monde, dans un nuage d’encens et de prières qui enivrait, et parée comme une vierge” (479). Intoxicated by the lights and a cheering audience, but in a church instead of a theatre, Esther simultaneously embodies Lucien’s past desires for the proper high-society woman (Mme de Bargeton) and for the sexually-available actress (Coralie).

Yet this paradoxical embodiment of opposites is also in accordance with the citation-based behavior of *la femme comme il faut*: “Elle va rarement à l’église, mais elle parlera religion [...]. Elle entame un discours néo-chrétien saupoudré d’idées politiques, qui n’est ni catholique ni protestant, mais moral [...] où vous reconnaissez une pièce de chaque étoffe qu’ont tissée les doctrines modernes aux prises” (AEF 28). The stitched-together ideas on morality donned by the proper woman reflect Esther “parée comme une vierge”: the outcome of both women’s religious education is an improved ability to clothe themselves according to the fashion.

In her correspondence with Nucingen, Esther similarly reproduces herself exactly as the wealthy baron sees her: as a work of art to be purchased and displayed as a sign of its owner’s wealth and good taste. However, her first two letters to him make the successful capitalist physically ill by tearing the mask off the *courtisane*, exposing the desire of a capitalist. Her writing makes her own body a reflection of the horrifying void of capitalism, the degrading exchange of a person for money: she refers to herself as “une pauvre fille qui doit être une esclave” (CH VI 603). Her letter, she states, acts as a receipt, showing proof of his part in her

dehumanizing commodification: “Vous avez payé, je me dois.” His resulting unease serves Balzac’s goal of exposing the inextricable link between capitalism and fictions of altruism. On Vautrin’s command, which he frames as a call to sacrifice herself for Lucien, Esther agrees to enter back into the profitable fiction that disguises prostitution as genuine affection.

For the literate *courtisane*, writing serves as an extension of adorning her body in the interest of extracting more money from a client. Directing her housekeeper, Europe, to help her prepare for Nucingen’s visit, Esther says, “Nous allons rire, c’est-à-dire, nous allons *travailler*,” to which the narrator adds: “Elle se mit à table, et écrivit la lettre suivante” (614). In this letter, disavowing her previously-stated intent to commit suicide after giving herself to the baron, Esther contradicts her own earlier writing, recalling Lucien’s opposing literary reviews in *Illusions perdues* (CH V, 460: we will return to this scene in our discussion of Lucien).

If she was not conscious of using her writing to depict herself in accordance with Lucien’s desire, she is aware of doing so when writing to Nucingen. Esther seems to purposefully embrace the degrading notion that the *courtisane* is pure surface, with no innate desires of her own to get in the way of interpreting her lover’s fantasies, using the trope to her advantage. She presents herself as “une femme achetée” who, in order to better please her buyer, disguises the exchange of pleasure for money under the fiction that she is, in fact, a “bonne fille.” This performance of the proper woman’s obedience means, paradoxically, projecting herself as the object of his desire for the very opposite of a good girl: “Vous trouverez sous les armes, et parée de vos dons, celle qui se dit, pour la vie, votre machine à plaisir” (CH VI 615). The phrase “sous les armes” usually means dressed in full armor, but, used idiomatically, means armed with feminine charms: “tous les moyens pour plaire et pour séduire.”²⁴ In her written self-portraits, the

²⁴ “Arme,” *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*. <http://www.tresor-de-la-langue-francaise-informatise.fr> Accessed July 23, 2015.

surface of Esther's body—armed and “parée”—is a reflection of Nucingen's views of her: she is both his conquest and the return on his investment.

One might be tempted to conclude from this letter—a performance in writing that Esther herself sees as labor—that she uses her ability to write in order to produce herself, as product, from which she will be the one to profit. However, the self that circulates in her letter is actually a product alienated from its producer: she portrays herself in accordance to Nucingen's desire. This ultimately equates her writing to the kind of journalistic production of articles as commodities, the circulation of which enriches the editor, not the writer.

In short, whether she writes as a proper woman or in the deceptive role of the *courtisane*, Esther embodies the ideal woman writer. If she reproduces another in her writing, it is not her own view but someone else's that circulates. If she produces herself, that “self” is ultimately the product of a male imagination. As a product of writing that contains no original thought, nothing of substance, the selves that her writing makes circulate exist as pure exchange value. Like the body of the woman holding the pen, feminine writing is pure surface on which are transcribed the thoughts of an absent, authoritative other.

Conclusion: Apprentissage manqué

Before I conclude, let me briefly relate the question of education of young men and young women back to the Parisian literary world's anxiety over distinguishing *argent* from *oripeaux* during the literary crisis of the late 1830s. Esther is not the only uneducated prostitute in this pair of novels whose sex appeal supplements a certain natural, *qua* physical, knowledge. The narrator of *Un grand homme* seems to reference “instruction” to suggest a parallel between Esther and the actress Coralie, whose theatrical talent is also not the result of any proper

schooling: “semblable à beaucoup d’actrices, Coralie, sans esprit malgré son ironie de coulisses, sans instruction malgré son expérience de boudoir, n’avait que l’esprit des sens et la bonté des femmes amoureuses” (*CH VI*, 387). Like Esther, she is “sans instruction,” that is, doubly protected from exercising the judgment of a typical bourgeois woman—the product of a religious education—by her two-fold marginality as both low-class actress and as a “type sublime de la figure juive,” (387). Furthermore, like Esther, Coralie’s formation took place in the theatre; like the *courtisane*, the *femme comme il faut*, and the beautiful journalist she falls in love with, mastery of her appearance functions as a form of intelligence.²⁵

For Lucien, his literary talent is equally a theatrical performance. While he arrives in Paris as the presumed author of *L’Archer de Charles IX*, his book only gets published once d’Arthez essentially rewrites it for him. Furthermore, while Lucien is the purported author of *Les Marguerites*, Balzac’s more savvy reader would have recognized certain poems written by real authors, including Delphine de Girardin, among the fictitious “original” sonnets that appear in the novel’s pages. Lucien’s quest of adopting a noble last name is thus far from the ideal of “une noble et pure renommée” that the character “Honoré de Balzac, the author” set up in the preface to *Illusions perdues*. Circulating publically under the name of “de Rubempré” is equivalent to playing one of several opposing roles in the drama of the battle over what is proper to the literary realm. Blondet, directing him in the series of contradictory reviews he will write of a fellow writer’s book, tells him exactly how to praise the book he had just lambasted in articles he had signed *C.* and *L.*. He instructs Lucien to sign this review de Rubempré (460). While the naïve writer recoils initially, he is won over by the promise of four-hundred francs, and is appeased by Coralie’s equation of writing reviews to acting: “Fais de la critique, [...] amuse-toi ! Est-ce que

²⁵ Lousteau, with his typical eye to the exchange value of art, says this: “À dix-huit ans, Coralie pourra dans quelques jours avoir soixante mille francs par an pour sa beauté. Elle est encore très sage” (388).

je ne suis pas ce soir en Andalous, demain ne me mettrai-je pas en bohémienne, un autre jour en homme ? Fais comme moi, donne-leur des grimaces pour leur argent, et vivons heureux” (461). Coralie’s talent makes her body the perfect surface onto which one can project any nationality, class or even sex; Lucien, while a talented writer, only puts into circulation other people’s ideas. His writing is the surface on which Blondet, d’Arthez, and others (including, later, Vautrin) write their own story.

Coralie’s lack of education makes clear something that Esther’s only hints at: her “esprit” stands clearly in opposition not only to a frame of mind proper to women, but also to one proper to (select) men: genius. The complete description of Coralie offers an adjectival close-up to make Hollywood jealous: face, lips, chin, eyelids, lashes, hair... landing—a bit oddly—on her forehead, typically a rather unsexy body part. “Sur un front brun [...] siégeait une magnificence de pensée qui aurait pu faire croire à du génie. Mais, semblable à beaucoup d’actrices, Coralie [...] n’avait que l’esprit des sens...” (ibid). The narrator punctuates his elegy to Coralie’s beauty with a back-handed complement: she has such exquisite control over her body that one *might* have mistaken her for a person of genius, were it not for a mind ruled by her physical senses.

The fact that the journalist and *arriviste* is pure surface, void of interior substance, is the character flaw that is truly responsible for his failure to make it in the *two* novels that Balzac produces in the completion of Lucien’s *roman d’apprentissage*. In spite of pages of disillusioning revelations, Lucien’s *apprentissage* only results in a superior ability to clothe his body. His sentimental education is a flop.

The dissecting gaze of the narrator that gives the lie to the superficial glow of genius on Coralie’s forehead recalls the novelist Daniel d’Arthez and his warning to Lucien at their first encounter:

Vous avez au front le sceau du *génie*, dit d'Arthez à Lucien en lui jetant un regard qui l'enveloppa; si vous n'en avez pas au cœur la volonté, si vous n'en avez pas la patience angélique, si à quelque distance du but que vous mettent les bizarreries de la destinée vous ne reprenez pas [...] le chemin de votre infini [...] renoncez dès aujourd'hui. (311, *emphasis mine*)

A *sceau* is both a sign and a seal: something that both reveals and closes off information. This one is true to form. First, Lucien appears here under the sign of genius. But it is unclear whether—for d'Arthez—this sign lifts the veil of a cleverly disguised ignorance, like Coralie's, or genuinely witnesses to the writer's potential for authentic, innate talent. The answer would, in d'Arthez' system, be determined by whether or not Lucien's heart bears the same sign as his forehead. An exterior sign by itself is no guarantee that what is represented without is contained within.

Indeed, Lucien appears similarly indistinguishable from the elite, like every other Parisian dandy. However, the flattening of social difference that the dandy represents is also an intellectual poverty. In the portrait of “La femme comme il faut,” the dandy is the male equivalent of the woman whose genius is limited to citation and superficiality. It is worth considering here, in closing, the following lengthy definition of such a feminized man:

La pensée, prise comme un marteau et par l'enfant qui sort du collège et par le journaliste obscur, a démoli les magnificences de l'état social [...] Aujourd'hui, tout drôle qui peut convenablement soutenir sa tête sur un col, couvrir sa puissante poitrine d'homme d'une demi-aune de satin en forme de cuirasse, montrer un front où reluit un génie apocryphe sous des cheveux bouclés, se dandiner sur deux escarpins vernis ornés de chaussettes en soie qui coûtent six francs, tient son lorgnon dans une de ses arcades sourcilières en

plissant le haut de sa joue, et, fût-il clerc d'avoué, fils d'entrepreneur ou bâtard de banquier, il toise impertinemment la plus jolie duchesse, l'évalue quand elle descend l'escalier d'un théâtre, et dit à son ami habillé par Buisson, chez qui nous nous habillons tous, et monté sur vernis comme le premier duc venu, : – Voilà, mon cher, une femme comme il faut.

First: that is a long sentence. The piling of details upon details attests not only to Balzac's experience as a journalist for *La Mode*, but also proves the narrator's equivalent mastery of the dandy's style, in addition to which he alone possesses a superior level of judgment, or intellectual substance. Second, while this dandy knows where to buy his clothes and how to put them on, he is unable to distinguish between true nobility, "la plus jolie duchesse," and its modern replacement, the proper woman of talent. The dandy thus represents a certain level of literacy unpaired with critical judgment necessary to actual genius, whence the glow of a "génie apocryphe." In short, this figure is a product of the increased educational opportunities, from which Balzac himself benefited, but which, paradoxically, the narrator of this portrait would like to remain available only to an elite few.

In *Un grand homme*, D'Arthez's concern for Lucien's future reveals an underlying judgment that the dandy's *génie* is merely superficial. His warning to Lucien, to grow some heart or go home, recalls Balzac's own protective, paternalistic warning to his poetically-inclined readers. Unless this reader is already a pure and noble (male) author, Balzac seems to imply that taking up a pen will only ruin reputations, destroy families, and corrupt society. From within the novel framed by this warning, the figure of literary integrity shows his narrative superiority through his offer to educate his naïve friend. Through the process of disillusioning him, d'Arthez articulates Balzac's specific understanding of literary genius.

D'Arthez' assessment highlights the following main attributes innate to the "grand écrivain," or genius (in the economy of the Cénacle, at least): talent, persistence, and an intuitive ability to keep the goal in sight. These three traits could also be described as *pouvoir*, *vouloir*, and *savoir*, the three "components of novelistic genius" that Patrick Bray identifies as central to Balzac's embedded theory of the novel in his reading of *La Peau de chagrin* and its preface.²⁶ As Bray writes, "only by combining all three can the writer of genius successfully create a masterpiece. Power, desire, and knowledge are not opposite poles on the axis of some mystical life force, but are intimately connected in the work of a genius" (72). All three must be available to a writer of genius, and the absence of any one of the three suffices to make genius illusory.

²⁶ *The Novel Map: Space and Subjectivity in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction*, Chicago: Northwestern UP, 2013.

CHAPTER THREE: THE *COURTISANE* IN CIRCULATION: ALEXANDRE DUMAS FILS' *LA DAME AUX*
CAMÉLIAS

The year is 1847. The final volume of Honoré de Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* has at last been published. A writer exactly half Balzac's age is seeking to launch his own career as a popular novelist. Well aware of the profitability of the prostitute's narrative, twenty-four year-old Alexandre Dumas *fils* undertook to write his own version of one. The resulting novel, *La Dame aux camélias*, rewrites *L'Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, the 1731 novel by the Abbé Prévost, a work en vogue with the Romantics.¹ Dumas' book is organized around a first-person narration of the short but passionate affair between a naïve young man from the provinces, Armand Duval, and Marguerite Gautier, the Parisian *courtisane* who falls in love with him before dying of consumption.

The story draws on the writer's personal experience in two ways. First, Dumas fictionalizes his brief affair with the famous *demi-mondaine* known as Marie Duplessis, whose recent death would have increased public interest in the novel.² Second, by dramatizing the

¹ If any single text could be said to function as a foundation for received ideas of the market in sexual and textual desires, it would be Abbé Antoine-François Prévost's *Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731). The novel was beloved by writers and artists as well as the general public throughout the nineteenth century. The *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* says the following about the venal Manon and her naïve lover, Des Grieux: "[ce] sont des types qui resteront, que chacun connaît, et avec lesquels on croit avoir vécu, tant ils nous sont familiers" (vol. 10, 1092). The popular story also represented a path to commercial success. Re-imagined in print by George Sand in *Léone Léonie* (1835) and Alexandre Dumas *fils* in *La Dame aux camélias* (1848), and interpreted for the opera by Daniel Auber (*Manon Lescaut*, 1856), Jules Massenet (*Manon*, 1884) and of course Puccini (*Manon Lescaut*, 1893), Prévost's original text was also often re-issued as a best-selling classic by entrepreneurial *éditeurs* such as Alphonse Lemerre and the *frères* Gladys who sought out only the most profitable titles to include in collections of luxury volumes. On the nineteenth-century reception of Prévost's novel, see Léon Cellier: "Le mythe de Manon et les romantiques français," in *L'Abbé Prévost, Actes du Colloque d'Aix-en-Provence*, 1963, Ophrys, 1965; and J. P. Gilroy, *The Romantic Manon and des Grieux: Images of Prevost's Heroine and Hero in Nineteenth-century French literature*, Sherbrooke, P. Q., Naaman, 1980.

² The Parisian reader of 1848 would have easily recognized in Marguerite Gautier the story of Alphonsine Plessis, born to rural working-class parents in 1824, and established in the Parisian demi-monde by 1839. Dumas *fils* met her in 1845, when she was also found in the company of Jules Janin and Franz Lizst. One of her lovers married her, making her the Comtesse de Perregaux in 1846. She died, in debt, in 1847 at the age of twenty-three. For more

circulation of both writing and the writer as commodities, Dumas represents the challenges of working in the literary marketplace in the wake of the first-generation of self-produced “canonical” authors and literary critics—men like Balzac and Dumas *père*. The resulting novel, published in a two-volume set in 1848 by Alexandre Cadot, was immediately successful.³ And—what was perhaps of more importance to Dumas *fils*—it effectively brought the young writer out from beneath the shadow of Dumas *père*.

The figure of the Parisian novelist as public figure is present in the novel from the beginning. The author attributes to his frame narrator a defense of the book’s titular subject: the *femme entretenue*, a seductress held responsible for manipulating men’s sexual desire and women’s desire to consume. In it, he writes:

Hugo a fait *Marion Delorme*, Musset a fait *Bernerette*, Alexandre Dumas [*père*] a fait *Fernande*, les penseurs et les poètes de tous les temps ont apporté à la courtisane l’offrande de leur miséricorde. Si j’insiste sur ce point, c’est que parmi ceux qui vont me lire, beaucoup peut-être sont déjà prêts à rejeter ce livre, dans lequel ils craignent de ne voir qu’une apologie du vice et de la prostitution, et l’âge de l’auteur contribue sans doute encore à motiver cette crainte. (38)

Beneath the pretense of mercifully depicting an exceptional *courtisane*—one capable of true love—the work hereby reveals a secondary theme no less central to the novel: the virtues of ambition. Here Dumas is interested in how one produces oneself as an exceptional writer—able to enter the circle of literary greats. Dumas’ narrator does not pretend that works alone are what

biographical details, see Joanna Richardson’s *The Courtesans: The Demi-Monde in 19th-century France* (1967), pages 97-106; and the introduction to *Le livre des courtisanes. Archives secrètes de la Police des mœurs (1861-1876)*, edited by Gabrielle Houbre (2006).

³ In his rather flat preface to the book, Antoine Livio claims that the novel would quickly become “le bestseller du XIXe siècle,” (6). But no one has undertaken a Pleiade edition of the works of Dumas *fils*.

made these authors great; to the contrary, he observes that it is the writers' pre-existing greatness that allows them to redeem the *courtisane* without damaging their own reputations: "quelques fois un grand homme les a réhabilitées de son amour et même de son nom" (emphasis mine). And yet, by undertaking a similar "rehabilitation" project, this nameless narrator seems to think that—in spite of his acknowledged youth and lack of accomplishments—he can create a similar name for himself.

Dumas demonstrates here a belief that it is possible to be the author of one's own destiny, but only if the writer possesses, along with his literary talents, an exceptional degree of desire and drive. In *La Dame aux camélias*, we are in a new world, a capitalist world, in which social status and success are the products of education and ambition, and not of inheritance. That said, it is important to note that Dumas' point was hardly new: as is well known, replacing inheritance with merit was a critical tenet of the 1789 Revolution. Education remains, at this point, a vehicle for the reproduction of class hierarchy: *fils* was educated because *père* acknowledged his bastard son and sent him to school, just as *père*'s father had done for him. Indeed, what makes the narrator able to profit from the story Armand tells him is, in fact, his class. The question becomes: what does Dumas' reincarnation of the bootstrap myth otherwise allow him to say?

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Dumas' work produces a fictionalized figure of the ideal author as self-made man, now positioned against the familiar pairing of the reformed *courtisane* and her poetically-inclined lover. Narrative authority, Dumas suggests, depends more on initiative than position. But my chapter also makes a second argument, regarding the novel's response to the threats posed by this new capitalist world order in which ambition is king. Dumas evinces, I show, that the dangers inherent in capitalism—the temptations of desire in all its

manifestations—can be controlled by reason and science. This stance is elaborated via the concept of the poisonous venal body—and either contact with, or similarity to, it.

Throughout the novel, Dumas is obsessed by the notion of what Derrida might call the “trace”—the idea of presence in absence, and its relationship to social fears about the invisible and invidious nature of desire, contagion, and disease. Marguerite’s illness, for example, is fluid, contagious, liquid. Both in life and in death, she leaves a contaminating trace—blood, tears, ink, perfume—which lingers and endangers even after her departure. Dumas’ abiding problem is whether and by whom such traces can be contained. I explain that Dumas’ condemnation of the *courtisane* is more emphatic than Balzac’s because, in his work, economic venality is overshadowed by venereal disease. I connect both the two lovers’ similarly contagious bodies (each oozing puss and pestilence), and their hysterical tears (the visible sign of their common emotional fragility), to liquid capital, which for Dumas includes not only possessions and land, but also books and other forms of intellectual property. I then evaluate the various practices of reading and writing depicted in the novel in order to understand what constitutes, for Dumas, an authority capable of containing such liquidity, and controlling its circulation. I conclude that the novel’s relationship to containment and circulation demonstrates how art both produces and is produced by a shift in ideological authority, in which the State/nobility are replaced by science and disinterested (i.e. undesiring) rational thought. The superior narrative control produced by Dumas’ novel relies on a certain scientific authority acting as a prophylactic against the circulation of mire into which an author must be willing to descend if he is to elevate himself within the literary industry.

In essence, my two central arguments in this chapter are about the relationship between capitalism, status, authorship, and literary art. The first is that Dumas embraces the capitalist idea

that social status should be a product of education and ambition, i.e. merit. Consequently, greatness, in writing as in other things, is neither inherent nor inherited. It is rather, the combined result of talent, drive and education. Great writers can be, and are, Dumas' narrator suggests, self-made men. The second is that Dumas challenges Balzac's complex critique of capitalist society by insisting that science and reason can contain capitalism's excesses and keep its evils in check. Literature provides a template for this process. In his work, the great (male) writer wards off capitalism's seductive—and feminized—dangers: his art is the proof of his success.

Structuring Containment

In the largest, and arguably “central” portion of the book, Armand recounts the tale of his liaison with Marguerite as he convalesces from an illness brought on by the exhumation of her body. When he first met her, the popular Parisian *courtisane* was already dying of consumption. Touched by the young man's concern for her, she gradually gives up her wealthy patrons and her life of pleasure in order to spend the summer with him in the countryside near Paris. However, at Armand's father's covert request, she leaves him, returning to her former life and thereby breaking her young lover's heart. Wounded, Armand leaves to travel the Orient; Marguerite dies before his return.

This cathartic, confessional tale is bookended by two other first-person narratives: before it, the nameless frame-narrator's account (which takes place chronologically *after* the central narrative) detailing how he came to be the recipient of Armand's story. Following the young man's tale, there is a collection of journal-style letters, written by Marguerite herself on her deathbed, explaining her break with Armand as the requisite sacrifice of their love for the sake of his future and that of his sister, whose impending marriage would be imperiled should the extent

of Armand's liaison with Marguerite become public knowledge. This *courtisane*'s tale is thus both contained within narrative, but also multiplied and disseminated by the very structures that appear to restrict its circulation. That this structure juxtaposes three different authoritative views, each with varying degrees of contact with the diseased woman, is significant. Who knows best: the nameless frame-narrator who hears the story after Marguerite's death, the young man who lived with her for several months, or the *courtisane* herself?

The three narrators' accounts converge, however, on two points. First, all three underline Marguerite's exceptional nature: she differs from other women of her profession not only in the nobility of her sentiments, but also in her written expression of them. Having handed the frame narrator one of her letters to read, Armand remarks, "Qui croirait jamais que c'est une fille entretenue qui a écrit cela!" (46). And second, all three make a clear analogy between her venality—the life of pleasure that she pays for with her body—and her consistently incurable illness.⁴ The text as a whole seems to insist, on one hand, that Marguerite is *not* like the other venal women whose lives are the metaphoric expression of social disease. Yet, on the other hand, it simultaneously confirms the importance of distancing her contagious body from Armand and, ultimately, from his sister, who represents the proper bourgeois woman poised to marry respectably (and to dutifully reproduce).

In addition to reproducing bourgeois ideologies concerning women and the working class, the juxtaposition of the three narrators also sets up the possibility for the existence of an extra-diagetic writerly figure who appears somehow exceptional, even while firmly situated

⁴ Armand, for example, describes her former life of pleasure as symptoms of a physical illness and/or hysteria: "Cependant cette gaieté, cette façon de parler et de boire, qui me paraissaient chez les autres convives les résultats de la débauche, de l'habitude ou de la force, me semblaient chez Marguerite un besoin d'oublier, une fièvre, une irritabilité nerveuse..." (92).

within the limits of a system based on the notion of contagion: one in which contact is both necessary and sufficient for the spread of disease.

Liquid bodies, liquid cash and an outpouring of words

The containing structure of the narrative is repeated in how the text itself responds to the threats arising from contact with—and, as an effect, similarity to—a venal body. The relationship between immorality, contagion and the bodily fluids that circulate in this novel of prostitution is key. As Bernadette Lintz adroitly demonstrates in her article “Concocting *La Dame aux camélias*: Blood, tears and other fluids,” the novel’s depiction of Marguerite’s menstrual discharge, tuberculosis-induced sputum, and decomposing corpse as well as Armand’s tears, calls readily on the mid-century’s interpellated medical and religious discourses.⁵ While agreeing with Lintz’ analysis of Marguerite’s “liquid” body as the site of punishment for the *courtisane*’s denial of maternity, and of Armand’s tears as a redemptive blood-letting that flushes his system of his lover’s disease, it is nonetheless important to emphasize the extent to which these fluids are connected to anxieties about how the circulation of capital was undermining the stability of class hierarchies in the period leading up to the 1848 revolution.

It is unknown whether Dumas *fils* himself read the entirety of Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet’s 1836 *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, but he surely read his father’s 1843 essay on Parisian prostitution, in which Parent is cited. The son’s treatment of Marguerite Gautier as a vessel of infectious fluids—as liquid waste—is typical of the analogy between

⁵ *Nineteenth-century French Studies*, 33:3 (2005), p. 287-307.

prostitutes and sewers present in Parent's study and propagated by the majority of writers of the time.⁶ Dumas père's summary emphasizes this connection in particular.

In the very first representation of Marguerite by the frame narrator, before she even has a name or a body, she is depicted as analogous to sewage by virtue of her venality. The narrator calls her apartment—easily identifiable as one belonging to “une femme entretenue” (18)—a “cloaque splendide” (22). *Cloaque* is defined in the *Trésor de la langue française* thus: “Endroit prévu pour servir de réceptacle aux eaux sales et aux immondices.” (Additionally, *cloaque* and *immondices* were both terms emphasized in Dumas père's study.) These definitions not only underline the liquid nature of the luxurious apartment's former resident (“eaux sales”), but also remind the reader of her low-class origins: “immondices” suggests the filth of the streets, that foul mud which the *courtisane*'s carriage splattered upon the carriages of the envious “femmes du monde” (18).

Yet a reference to sewers is not entirely negative. Like the Parisian sewers, whose function was viewed as sanitary—even if their contents were potentially lethal—the “cloaque” itself is rendered harmless, supposedly, by the sacrificial death of the *courtisane*: “les femmes les plus vertueuses pouvaient [...] pénétrer jusque dans sa chambre” (22) because the “immondice”—the kept woman it used to house—is supposedly no longer present: “Celle chez qui je me trouvais était morte [...]. La mort avait purifié l'air de ce cloaque splendide” (ibid). To

⁶ Parent-Duchâtelet's own process was, in fact, similarly text-based: he spent years delving into previously-ignored archives of the prefecture de Police, including those of the Bureau de Mœurs, where he read the dossiers containing the officers' accounts of their interactions with individual prostitutes and brothel madams. Such archival material would later take on its own literary value, as demonstrated by the 1863 publication (by slang dictionary editor Loredan Larchey, no less) of the police records of prostitution between 1759 and 1774, a fact recorded in the 2009 publication by historian Gabrielle Houbre, *Le Livre des courtisanes, archives secrètes de la police des mœurs*, a book that, today, circulates similarly on its capital as both documentary and voyeuristic entertainment. It is the archive, and not the kind of “cloaque immonde,” that Parent-Duchâtelet first imagined; indeed, the sources he credits for the large majority of his book, which includes chapters on “Mœurs et habitudes des prostituées” and “Conditions diverses des prostituées,” are largely textual. He mostly reports compiled data, gathered by others, which he then uses to support his claims.

their disappointment, perhaps, but in the greater interest of their moral health, a.k.a. their propriety, the noble ladies who entered as potential buyers of the dead *courtisane*'s possessions were effectively shielded from the sight of venal sex: "ces dames ne suprirent que ce qui était à vendre depuis le décès, et rien de ce qui se vendait du vivant de la locataire" (22).

Indeed, the narrator purports, even the objects in the *cabinet de toilette*—the room where the sexualized body would have been the most exposed—retain no trace of their venal origin. Their utility having been negated by the death of their user, only their exchange value remains: "C'était là une magnifique collection, et pas un de ces mille objets, si nécessaires à la toilette d'une femme comme celle chez qui nous étions, n'était en autre metal qu'or ou argent" (22-23). Thus, the only remnants of the *courtisane* that the proper ladies are exposed to in the heart of the *cloaque* are monetary. This recalls the phrase *pecunia non olet*.⁷ The object of their desire—despite its origin in a *cloaque*—is, itself, clean, free of any risk of contamination. And, by association, these women's desires as consumers do not risk troubling the social order.

The sanitation of the *cloaque* is thus dependent not only on the *courtisane*'s death, but also on maintaining a clear distinction between the desire that brought them there from that of the frame narrator's. He notes that it was the curious women visiting the apartment sought in vain "au milieu de toutes ces merveilles, les traces de cette vie de courtisane dont on leur avait fait, sans doute, de si étranges récits" (22). The bourgeois value system that trained women to stay out of potentially embarrassing locations keeps them from satisfying a more voyeuristic desire for "traces". Meanwhile, the narrator—unbound by the same rules of gender-based

⁷ This phrase, roughly translated to mean "money does not stink," evokes the urine tax imposed by the Roman emperor Vespasian. It implies that the value of money is indifferent to the source of one's wealth, a concept vital to the new members of the elite bourgeoisie whose wealth was the product of labor, and not inherited. For more on the shift in the meaning of money—handling it, making it, spending it—from inherently immoral to moral over the course of the nineteenth-century, see Victoria Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris, 1830-1870*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000.

shame—is able to read between the lines, or rather, the initials, engraved on the objects: “Moi qui ne m’effarouchais pas à la vue du cabinet de toilette d’une femme entretenue, je m’amusais à en examiner les détails [...] et je m’aperçus que tous ces ustensiles magnifiquement ciselés portaient des initiales variées et des couronnes différentes” (23). This plurality of “masculine” initials on a wealthy woman’s possessions suffices to represent to the narrator “une prostitution de la pauvre fille” (23).

Thus, the narrator is only partly right when he says that the tangible “traces” of the truth behind the “étranges récits” the *courtisane*’s narrative are not to be found in the apartment. Indeed, the letters constituting the written trace of her life, had been evacuated from the apartment before the sale, and were thus unavailable to those present as consumers. We will learn, however, upon arriving at the end of the novel, that these traces had actually ended up in the possession of the narrator, and were the sole guarantor of the novel’s authority and interest. This, thus, falsifies the narrator’s claim that “les mystères étaient morts avec la déesse.” On the first page, the frame narrator had taken on the “mystère” of the *courtisane* in the vague explanation of his authority: “Par une circonstance particulière, seul je pouvais les [des faits] écrire, car seul j’ai été le confident des derniers détails sans lesquels il eût été impossible de faire un récit intéressant et complet” (17). It is the commutable property of the *courtisane*’s life story that puts it in the hands of the narrator. And this story will inevitably bring him a certain sum of money that, like the precious objects in the *courtisane*’s dressing room, will not smell of the *cloaque* in which the story was first written. So not only does the odor of the sewer, connected to the woman herself, not stick to the *courtisane*’s artifacts, but even their aura—narratives about her venality, accounts of her allure; that which would make her body a *mystère*, or the perversion thereof—evaporates off her possessions following her death.

At the same time, there is an undercurrent in this *cloaque*: the narrator is practically swept into the “cabinet de toilette,” where he finds items of gold and silver that, unlike her enviable furniture, clearly identify—to the narrator, anyway—the apartment’s former resident as a *courtisane*. The next time the narrator presents Marguerite, she is once again associated with liquid bodily waste, but it is menstrual blood rather than excrement that stands metonymically for the saleable state of her body. He describes how the *dame aux camélias* used her signature flowers to communicate her sexual availability, carrying white or red camellias in accordance—the reader must only assume⁸—with her menstrual cycle, a clearer discussion of which would constitute a grave social taboo. But it is the venal aspect of this “signature” which, as Lintz argues, is most offensive:

More than just committing gender and social improprieties, what the text suggests about Marguerite’s behavior is that it symbolically denaturalizes and desacralizes the most valued female biological function, that of reproduction, by tying it to commercial considerations and subordinating it to economic interests such as the use of sex to make a living rather than to produce life. (289)

Her monthly menses—signified by her flowers—are in this sense wasted, and therefore both waste and waste product.⁹

If her flowers suggest an *odor di femina*, after the *courtisane*’s death this “aroma” has come to signify her shame, as is blatantly evident in the frame narrator’s final description of her lifeless corpse. He accompanies Armand to the cemetery where Marguerite is to be exhumed under the premise of moving her grave to a newer section. Once again, she is equated with liquid

⁸ The narrator feigns ignorance in the face of this sign, as I discuss further below.

⁹ See Jonathan Strauss, *Human Remains: Medicine, Death, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, New York: Fordham UP, 2012.

waste, with miasma: “La bière était en chêne, et ils [les fossoyeurs] se mirent à dévisser la paroi supérieure qui faisait couvercle. L’humidité de la terre avait rouillé les vis et ce ne fut pas sans efforts que la bière s’ouvrit. Une odeur infecte s’en exhala, malgré les plantes aromatiques dont elle était semée” (61). Opening the coffin constitutes an act against nature, the forces of which (the oak, the rust and the aromatic plants) would have kept the *courtisane*’s unsightly and malodorous decayed body hidden, like the first major underground sewer system constructed between 1805 and 1812. Once opened, the “odeur infecte” of the *courtisane*’s body is exposed, immediately making both Armand and the narrator physically ill (62-63).

The harm of exposing the corpse to the air recalls a result from Parent-Duchâtelet’s work on liquid and solid waste (*Hygiène publique* [1836]), performed concurrently with his investigations into prostitution in Paris. Parent usually concluded that waste products, while stinky and offensive, were generally harmless and sometimes even beneficial. But, writes Charles Bernheimer, Parent “had to acknowledge that there were circumstances in which organic corruption could be dangerous”: *poudrette*, dried fecal matter useful as fertilizer, was proven to cause illness and even death when it was exposed to water and air and allowed to ferment (13). This led Parent-Duchâtelet to recommend “rigorous exclusion and containment,” (13), a strategy that would echo in his report on prostitution. While Marguerite may have been exceptionally beautiful in life, in death she belongs to the small category of dangerous, even lethal, types of waste matter. Armand’s death-like reaction supports this: “[Il] ne bougeait pas [...] ; il était pâle comme le cadavre que nous venions de voir” (63). The narrator, while disgusted, takes on the role of a doctor who, for having dissected the dead, is all the better able to treat the living. As we shall see in the following section, the ideal author will thus take extreme care to successfully contain the body of the *courtisane*, even in a novel touting her redemption. In this way, the

writer's scientific acumen reigns in capitalism's underbelly, rescuing the social body from the dangers of corruption and disease.

The book's frame narrator, in spite of his stated "indulgence inépuisable pour les courtisanes" (26) thus appears unconvinced of Marguerite's harmlessness, or opposed more broadly to those who believed that venal women could be redeemed. Perhaps Dumas' hero's narration will prove able to remove her from the sewers. Will Armand's account be less tarnished, since he re-imagines Marguerite through his account of falling in love with her? Not entirely: his portrayal of her reveals that Marguerite's sexual availability makes her similar to, if not yet, liquid waste. The metaphor he uses compares her to a bottle of exotic perfume:

On voyait qu'elle en était encore à la virginité du vice. Sa marche assurée, sa taille souple, ses narines roses et ouvertes, ses grands yeux légèrement cerclés de bleu, dénotaient une de ces natures ardentes qui répandent autour d'elles un parfum de volupté, comme ces flacons d'Orient qui, si bien fermés qu'ils soient, laissent échapper le parfum de la liqueur qu'ils renferment. (88)

This pleasant odor both contradicts and recalls the odor escaping from the closed coffin. Furthermore, while the *flacon* may remain closed, this body is presented as porous: her nose, eyes, and waist (perhaps a synecdoche for what lies below) exude her ardent, intoxicating nature, and permit, if not invite, penetration. She is othered and exoticized by affiliation with the Orient, even though she comes from only as far as the rural French countryside, both tropes that equate her perfume-bottle body with prostitution.¹⁰

¹⁰ The parallel between Marguerite's body and the Orient is furthered by Armand's use of language evoking a military conquest to describe his courtship. For example, « J'étais trop avancé pour reculer, et d'ailleurs cette fille me bouleversait. Ce mélange de gaieté, de tristesse, de candeur, de prostitution, cette maladie même qui devait développer chez elle la sensibilité des impressions comme l'irritabilité des nerfs, tout me faisait comprendre que si, dès la première fois, je ne prenais pas *d'empire* sur cette nature oublieuse et légère, elle était perdue pour moi. » (98, emphasis added)

In Armand's account we do not find the frame narrator's negation of her ability to leave a trace. Her liquid nature is in fact connected to what makes her presence readable, even in her absence, since it leaves evidence of her all-too-physical contact with her surroundings. While alive, her presence-as-absence is well-established in terms of her interaction with textiles: her artful use of her clothing to distract from her insufficiently feminine shape¹¹ corresponds to the traces she leaves in the folds of Armand's pillow after she has quit his bed.¹² But in addition to the imprint of her absent body on bedclothes and dress, Marguerite's body also leaves a trace on the textual.

When Armand returns to their summer residence in the town of Bougival, just outside Paris, he finds Marguerite absent but he encounters the book he had given her: "*Manon Lescaut* était ouvert sur la table. Il me sembla que d'endroits en endroits les pages étaient mouillées comme par des larmes" (198). Tear stains bear witness to her presence as a sentimental, empathetic reader of *Manon Lescaut*. While these tears suggested at first her difference from Manon—Marguerite had previously remarked upon reading Prévost's book that "lorsqu'une femme aime, elle ne peut pas faire ce que faisait Manon" (166)—upon consideration of the narrator's presentation of Manon, it becomes clear that, in the context of Dumas' rewriting of Prévost, Marguerite's tears only bring her more in harmony with her eighteenth-century sister.¹³

¹¹ "Grande et mince jusqu'à l'exagération, elle possédait au suprême degré l'art de faire disparaître cet oubli de la nature par le simple arrangement des choses qu'elle revêtait. [...] L'épais manchon [...] qu'elle appuyait contre sa poitrine, était entouré de plis si habilement ménagés, que l'œil n'avait rien à redire, si exigeant qu'il fût, au contour des lignes" (28).

¹² "Quand elle fut partie, je fus épouvanté de la solitude dans laquelle elle me laissait. Deux heures après son départ, j'étais encore assis sur le lit qu'elle venait de quitter, regardant l'oreiller qui gardait les plis de sa forme..." (222).

¹³ The initial difference between Manon and Marguerite is established by Marguerite's [By Manon's??] dryness: her heart is assumed to be a vast, arid desert while Manon's body is potentially productive after her death, watered as it is by her lover's tears: "Manon était morte dans un désert, il est vrai, mais dans les bras de l'homme qui l'aimait avec toutes les énergies de l'âme, qui, morte, lui creusa une fosse, l'arrosa de ses larmes et y ensevelit son cœur ; tandis que Marguerite, [...] était morte au sein d'un luxe somptueux, [...] mais aussi dans un désert du cœur, bien plus aride, bien plus vaste, bien plus impitoyable que celui dans lequel avait été enterrée Manon." (37, emphasis

The only instance in Prévost's novel when Manon's words are not reported indirectly is in the letter she leaves for Des Grieux upon departing from the country house they had been inhabiting: Manon tells her lover that she has left in order to "work" for money—or rather, to entrap a wealthy dupe—to support them (Prévost 71). When Marguerite leaves Armand for the comte de N...., departing in secret from their shared house in the country, the copy of *Manon Lescaut* takes the place of Manon's letter. The letter that Marguerite writes to Armand when she takes off for Paris confirms, for its reader, only that she intends to resume her venal life: Armand does not comprehend the reference to his sister that would have rendered Marguerite's absence, and her tears, the sign of a redemptive sacrifice. Thus, far from washing the modern *courtisane* clean of her venality, the tears she sheds on the account of Manon's plight only serve to further draw attention to her body's excessive presence.

Because Armand's attraction to her cannot be divorced from the ways in which illness has rendered her body vulnerable, Marguerite's ailment brings threateningly uncontrollable bodily fluids into play:¹⁴ "Vers la fin du souper, Marguerite fut prise d'un accès de toux plus fort que tous ceux qu'elle avait eus depuis que j'étais là. Il me sembla que sa poitrine se déchirait intérieurement. La pauvre fille devint pourpre, ferma les yeux sous la douleur et porta à ses lèvres sa serviette qu'une goutte de sang rougit." (93) Her body is again an imperfect container, coming apart from the inside, and breaking down even before she is buried, as suggested by her unnatural discoloration. Here, the trace she leaves, the drop of blood staining her napkin, is again the sign of a body that is both socially unacceptable and diseased. While it is not the menstrual

added) This difference breaks down, in Marguerite's favor, only to have the significance of tears shift from a marker of potential productivity to failed (re)productivity of the *courtisane*.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the scientific community's equation of female bodily fluids—and those of the prostitute in particular—with sexually transmitted diseases, see Mary Spongberg, *Feminizing Venereal Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse*, New York U. P., 1997.

blood implied by her flowers, it is the sign of an illness that has been socially coded as synonymous with a venal lifestyle. Thus, Armand, far from redeeming Marguerite from the discourses of contagion that condemn her, repeats them in his account of her, even as he emphasizes her elevated nature.

Finally, even in Marguerite's own words, there is an equation between the fluids escaping her body due to her illness and the money she receives as a *courtisane*. When Armand first admits his love for her, she turns him away saying, "vous aurez une triste maîtresse ; une femme nerveuse, malade, triste, ou gaie d'une gaieté plus triste que le chagrin, une femme qui crache le sang et qui dépense cent mille francs par an" (96). Tears, blood and money all flow uncontrollably from this body. The parallel construction between coughing up blood and spending a hundred thousand francs makes them both symptoms of her illness. It is thus unquestionable, in the narrator's and even in the *courtisane*'s own view, that the best way to avoid inevitable contagion—and the resultant loss of one's own tears and money—is to avoid contact with her.

But Armand Duval, it seems, simply cannot do this. As a result, his body also takes on—or so it seems at first—a liquidity of its own that proves equally unhealthy. In Armand's description of his encounter with Marguerite at the *Théâtre de Variétés*, the beauty of a woman he had once found attractive but had not pursued strikes him. This time, however, she's slightly different: "Elle a été malade" (67); and she has not been cured. His newly revived attraction for her is experienced as the sudden onset of an illness: "Sans que je susse pourquoi, je devenais pâle et mon coeur battait violemment. J'ai un de mes amis qui s'occupe de sciences occultes, et qui appellerait ce que j'éprouvais l'affinité des fluides ; moi, je crois tout simplement que j'étais destiné à devenir amoureux de Marguerite, et que je le pressentais" (67). The friend's diagnosis,

“l’affinité des fluides” describes both Armand’s own imbalanced body as well as his attraction to Marguerite whose allure as a *courtisane* is inextricably connected to her infectious bodily fluids.¹⁵

Armand’s body is thus as much of a carrier of disease as Marguerite’s. At first, it seems to be as a result of his contact with her. In addition to the feverish lifestyle he adopts (during which he bleeds money), the most visible symptom of his love-sickness is his uncontrollable, hysterical crying. This is present from the beginning of the book. From the moment he meets the frame narrator, he is almost always in tears: “M. Duval, fortement ému, ne fit aucun effort pour cacher son émotion, et ce fut des larmes dans les yeux et un tremblement dans la voix qu’il me [parla]” (41). This excessive emotion is equated with illness, just as Marguerite’s venality is. The frame narrator describes Armand crying again, referring to him as “[le] malade”: “Deux grosses larmes roulèrent sur les joues du malade qui détourna la tête pour me les cacher” (57). Feverishness brought on by a renewed contact with the *courtisane*’s body is likewise expressed as a liquid: “Un peu avant la tombe, Armand s’arrêta pour essuyer son visage qu’inondaient de grosses gouttes de sueur” (60).

However, I would like to propose that Armand’s vulnerability to contagion, his permeability so to speak, is a preexisting condition: a trait implicit in a character who performs the role of young romantic hero, a kind of hero who has become passé in 1837. Anxiety that this man’s emotional frailty may make him similar to a woman like Marguerite is expressed in Armand’s concern that his tears make him appear less than masculine: “Laissez-moi rester quelques minutes encore, le temps de m’essuyer les yeux, pour que les badauds de la rue ne regardent pas comme une curiosité ce grand garçon qui pleure” (48). He infantilizes himself,

¹⁵ Yet this eighteenth-century explanation is outdated, Armand says: a product of “sciences occultes.” He replaces this explanation with his own: destiny. This conflation of feminine allure with illness, Lintz argues, is Dumas’ way of highlighting an equally outdated “romanticized cultural construction of consumption” (Lintz 302).

calling himself a “garçon,” which enacts the Rousseauian trope of the young hero in search of a mother figure. But he goes farther, saying that crying just isn’t masculine: even a boy who cries would be viewed as a “curiosité.”

This word, “curiosité,” puts both his gender and his autonomy in question. If the porous, “flacon”-esque state of Marguerite’s exoticized body was a sign of her venality, her femininity further demonized by the way that she flaunts her avoidance of reproduction, repudiating the social mandate towards maternity, then Armand’s liquid eyes risk making him not only less than a man, but may also position him on the feminine side of a venal equation: he becomes “une curiosité,” an object that can be consumed by an othering gaze. It was the frame narrator’s initial identification as an “amateur de curiosités” that had lead him in to Marguerite’s apartment, if not to buy, than at least to look (18). In spite of being the narrator of his story, Armand—emotional, diseased, feminized, objectified—suddenly appears inferior in both power and wealth to the frame narrator. Of course the latter ended up as a buyer at the auction of Marguerite’s things, which is what then allowed him to make the gift of the book to Armand that resulted in their relationship, granted him access to Armand’s apartment, and resulted in the hero’s reciprocal gift of narrative.

But even the frame narrator is uneasy that the source of his story is the mutual exchange of gifts, and not of payment for the satisfaction of his desire to know, his desire for narrative. He states, “Je m’intéressais malgré moi à ce jeune homme. Peut-être dans cet intérêt y avait-il de l’égoïsme ; peut-être avais-je entrevu sous cette douleur une touchante histoire de cœur, peut-être enfin mon désir de la connaître était-il pour beaucoup dans le souci que je prenais du silence d’Armand” (51) The narrator’s uncontrollable interest in Armand reframes the sexual desire that leads a client to a prostitute: a selfish desire for romance, however fictional, and for

“knowledge.” Armand’s illness and tears constitute signs of venality—and the saleable state of his narrative—because they indicate a body that is not only less than masculine, but in a more precarious economic position.

It could be argued that Armand’s tears are a melancholic symptom in a realist context that emphasizes the importance of the visual. They are certainly symptoms of a body out of control—and out of control of its own discourse, of the signs it lets circulate. Since her death took place during his absence, Armand was unable to see Marguerite’s body, and is therefore unable to control his repeated expression of loss, since he is unable to come to terms with what exactly he lost in her death.¹⁶ Once he sees the exhumed body, his tears cease. Lintz proposes that this drying up is a sign of healing: “His previously profuse tears, which had earned him the ‘vive sympathie’ [47] and unqualified moral support of his male companion, dry up in the process of his cathartic healing and give way to a flow of words as he starts spinning the tale of his relationship with the dead courtesan” (293). And indeed, the talking cure does seem to have a beneficial effect on him, or at least the narrator wants to believe so at the novel’s conclusion: “Armand, toujours triste, mais soulagé un peu par le récit de cette histoire se rétablit vite” (246). But does the act of narration bring Armand into control of his body? Of his words?

I disagree with the notion that narration, for Armand, functions solely as a sign of healing in the overall structure of the novel. Rather, his outpouring of narrative, almost a logorrhea, also replaces his tears and serves as another expression of the same symptom, one equally liquid in nature. It is a symptom that will be siphoned out of him by the curious frame narrator who admits himself into Armand’s apartment under the sign of desiring Armand’s return to health, in

¹⁶ Armand’s “affinité des fluides” returns as a thirst that represents his desire to see, which is once again portrayed as a symptom of the illness he caught from Marguerite: “Je vous jure que je ne puis être calme que lorsque j’aurai vu Marguerite. C’est peut-être une soif de la fièvre qui me brûle, un rêve de mes insomnies, un résultat de mon délire...” (58).

a manner analogous to the doctors whose blood-letting weakens Marguerite as she writes her version of the story. Like a doctor, the narrator claims that he seeks to cure Armand's illness. Yet his actions more closely resemble those of Armand himself, who had said that he wished to cure Marguerite, even as he became her lover, an act that, rather than curing, only briefly postponed her inevitable death.

It must be noted that his tears did not begin with Marguerite's death. If Armand is, by nature, as incurable as Marguerite, and was so before his contact with Marguerite, what is his illness? If his tears are in fact related to loss, it is not only melancholic loss but also loss of an excessively embodied, but exclusively masculine, nature. The first time—chronologically—that Armand sheds tears is on the first occasion of entering in to Marguerite's bedroom, to where she had retreated following a severe coughing fit at the end of a small dinner party. His interest in Marguerite had begun two years prior to the encounter in her apartment, and is therefore sufficiently piqued, so to speak.

The sexual nature of the couple's first bedroom scene, theatrical in its presentation to the reader, is hardly disguised by the expression of his wish for her friendship or for a familial relationship. Armand begins:

—Vous vous tuez, madame, lui dis-je alors d'une voix émue ; je voudrais être votre ami, votre parent, pour vous empêcher de vous faire mal ainsi.

—Ah ! cela ne vaut vraiment la peine [...] Après quoi elle se leva et, prenant la bougie, elle la mit sur la cheminée et se regarda dans la glace. « Comme je suis pâle ! dit-elle en rattachant sa robe et en passant ses doigts sur ses cheveux déliés. (94)

The mirror, her own comment on her pallor, and her hands smoothing her untidy dress and hair both hides and doubles Armand's desiring, erotic gaze on her diseased body. When he does not

stand up to follow her when she moves to leave the bedroom, Marguerite, he says, “comprit l’émotion que cette scène m’avait causée” (ibid). Watching the tragically ill Marguerite in the candlelight, a theatrical setting that echoes the one Dumas’ reader is currently in, has clearly given Armand an erection.

The conclusion of the scene confirms this: following her consumptive fit, Marguerite has slipped back into her role of *courtisane*, which the mirror connotes. As such, the “émotion” that she would understand, and read easily, is male desire. The offer of her hand, and even her imperative, “venez” can be read at two levels: sentimental and erotic. When she tries to leave the room a second time, Armand keeps her there again, physically restraining her: “Je pris sa main, je la portai à mes lèvres en la mouillant malgré moi de deux larmes longtemps contenues.” The tears that escape, “malgré [lui],” and her response make this bedroom scene one of a youth’s initial visit to a brothel: “Eh bien, mais êtes-vous enfant ! dit-elle en se rasseyant auprès de moi.” Her use of the term “enfant” does not quite yet fit as an endearment, but seems like a criticism.

As Jean-Marie Goulemot has shown in *Ces livres qu’on ne lit que d’une main* (1997), the sentimental novel and the erotic novel are two sides of the same tapestry. Both genres can be identified by the text’s pursuit of an emotional *and* physical release, either of tears or of semen, respectively. In a novel such as Dumas’, in which the hero mocks—only to then enact—the performance of the sentimental novel’s version of love,¹⁷ and whose imagined (male) reader would have been familiar not only with *Manon Lescaut* but also, most likely, her less literary contemporaries, such a scene would arguably inspire a snicker or two at Armand’s youthful inability to keep his “tears” from soaking the *courtisane*’s hand.

¹⁷ Armand compares his love-struck shyness in the presence of Marguerite to his mistress’ hopeless love for him: “A cette époque, j’avais pour maîtresse une petite bourgeoise fort tendre et fort sentimentale, dont le sentiment et les lettres mélancoliques me faisaient rire. Je compris le mal que j’avais dû lui faire par celui que j’éprouvais” (71).

The widening of the gap between masculinity and femininity in the defining of gender difference during the July Monarchy witnessed the fall of the Romantic hero as he gradually ceded to a less emotive, more laconic figure of masculinity.¹⁸ Armand's permeable body is ambiguous: does it figure as part of Dumas' critique of the "romanticized cultural conception of consumption" (Lintz 302)? Or does it figure in the tradition of the libertine genre, to which both Prévost and Dumas each strongly argue (perhaps too strongly?) that his does not belong?

If we return to the frame narrative, keeping in mind the double-entendre of tears-as-semen, it becomes significant that most of the occasions on which Armand cries follow physical contact with an item metonymically replacing Marguerite. First, when presented with the copy of *Manon Lescaut* that the frame narrator purchased at the auction, and that—we learn—Armand had given to Marguerite, Armand strokes the book and sheds a tear, leaving a trace of his body on its pages: "‘C’est bien cela, fit-il en regardant la dédicace de la première page et en feuilletant, c’est bien cela.’ Et deux grosses larmes tombèrent sur les pages" (43). Next, he shows Marguerite's letter to the narrator, "Et tout ému de ses souvenirs, il considéra quelque temps l'écriture de cette lettre qu'il finit par porter à ses lèvres" (46). The word "ému" suggests his tears again, at the site of contact with writing that replaces the *courtisane's* body.

This fetishistic metonymy is confirmed by his expression, "Oh ! je donnerais dix ans de ma vie pour pleurer une heure à ses pieds" (47). He would exchange an early death (if by death, he means a *petite mort*, he seems to have a recurring problem with this...) for contact with the part of her body that will obligingly peek out, a few pages later, from under the worm-eaten shroud (62). Upon seeing the decayed face, he accordingly inserts into his mouth a textile representative of both the shroud and Marguerite's previously "textual" body (the book and the

¹⁸ For a thorough analysis of these seemingly contradictory forms of masculinity, see Margaret Waller's excellent study, *The Male Malady*.

letter): “Armand, sans pouvoir détourner son regard de cette figure, avait porté son mouchoir à sa bouche et le mordait” (62). This oral gesture acts as a perversion *avant la lettre* of the conflation of eyes and mouth, of contagion and sex, via contact with a handkerchief in the above-cited bedroom scene, already in Armand’s memory (occurring, as it does, later in the book, but earlier in the chronology).

In this context, then, the cessation of Armand’s tears does not mark the beginning of his cure, but rather points to a displaced impotence: his bodily fluids have shown that he, like Marguerite, is overly embodied, and as such, he is feminized; despite his male sex, he is less than masculine. His outpouring of discourse is a symptom of his own unregulated sexuality. The embodied—that is, spoken—narration of his affair to the frame narrator codes as a substitute for the impossible (or at least taboo) desire for sexual union with Marguerite’s dead body.

Moreover, if his words are metonymic with the trace of his bodily fluids, Armand does indeed occupy the same feminine position in respect to the frame narrator that Marguerite had with Armand, as suggested above. The relationship between the impotent Armand and the man who will publish his story is uncomfortably analogous to the Romantic lover and his almost-exceptional *courtisane*. At first, it is the book itself that is like a *courtisane*, the value of its capacity to satisfy a certain desire escalated by purely superficial means: « Pourquoi ? Je n’en sais rien. Sans doute pour ce *quelque chose d’écrit*. [...] Je dus donner beaucoup à penser aux gens qui, témoins de cette scène, se demandèrent sans doute dans quel but j’étais venu payer cent francs un livre que je pouvais avoir partout pour dix ou quinze francs au plus » (36). The second taboo that surfaces when the object of desire shifts from the luxury edition of *Manon Lescaut* to the story of Armand himself, is the taboo regarding male homosexuality within the homosocial climate of literary salons that sought to exclude women. When speaking to Armand, the frame

narrator denies his desire to know the story behind « *ce quelque chose d'écrit* », lying about why he wanted the volume (he says it was to anger another bidder). Then, he offers it as a gift to his interlocuter, but it is a gift that imposes reciprocity : « ...ce livre est à votre disposition et je vous prie de l'accepter [...] pour qu'il soit entre nous l'engagement d'une connaissance plus longue et de relations plus intimes » (44). Armand's contagious body, then, contains—or fails to contain—the object of the frame narrator's desire.

In the framework of the book's desire to produce an image of the new ideal author, one capable of producing himself via ambition, talent and education, the central couple's analogous fluids—tears, symptoms of illness, and sexual secretions—paint both Marguerite and Armand as equally embodied, equally venal, and equally feminine—and thus ensures their parallel incapacity to write. The ideal (male) author, Dumas suggests, must be capable of controlling the seductive and contagious forces of the capitalist world.

Writing the body: the courtesane as anti-author

It may be part of her exceptional status that Marguerite writes at all. Performing the trope of the poor country girl, abused by her mother and driven to prostitution in the city at an early age, she tells Armand, “Je suis une pauvre fille de la campagne, et je ne savais pas écrire mon nom il y a six ans” (131). The instances where Marguerite is inscribed far outnumber the times in the novel where she writes (for) herself.¹⁹ And indeed, her initial letters to Armand are short,

¹⁹ Before the narrative in which she is alive begins, Marguerite's absence is affirmed by a series of inscriptions: the printed poster that the frame narrator reads in the street (18); the first physical description of her is actually a description of a portrait of her (29); her affair with the duc then appears in the frame narrative as one of several stock stories about nameless prostitutes (30-33); her name is inscribed by hand in the novel *Manon Lescaut* (36), an inscription that echoes in the appearance of her name in the cemetery registry (52); the description of the portrait is similarly doubled by the death portrait in which all her features are described by their absence, and yet she remains recognizable (62).

existing merely to arrange for face-to-face interaction.²⁰ They are not the type of letters written to be kept, composed with an eye to posterity, which was typical of women's correspondence at the time. They are also noticeably lacking in the poetic style that characterizes her later, "journaling" correspondence, which are the only letters that achieve a wider circulation, passing from Marguerite to Julie to Armand to the narrator and finally, to the reader.

When she does write at slightly greater length, her words—a mixture of truth and fiction—fail to communicate the genuine sentiment that would distinguish her from other *courtisanes* and render her the equal of a bourgeois woman: instead her writing translates only her venality. When she writes to Armand to keep him from coming over while she is with the duc, she uses illness to cover/code for her prostituted state and her avowal of love is dismissed as a lie analogous to her doctor's orders to rest.²¹ Armand says, "Mon premier mot fut: « Elle me trompe ! »" (132). He ignores the rest. Moreover, it appears that she is aware of her writing's failure to represent her accurately, since she avoids most written exchanges with Armand, appearing instead in person to respond to both of his incendiary letters (145, 218). And once she abandons the business of being a *courtisane*, and her writing is required to replace the sale of her body, her letters circulate only in secret, only between women. Her exchanges with Prudence about the sale of her possessions from Bougival are locked away, unreadable to Armand and therefore to us (171).

In one way, Marguerite's contact with the volume of *Manon Lescaut* given to her by Armand sets her up as a writer by positioning her in parallel to the author of the book bearing her

²⁰ She writes the minimum, using incomplete sentences: "Voici mes ordres: Ce soir au Vaudeville. Venez pendant le troisième entr'acte" (120).

²¹ Marguerite's letter reads, "Cher enfant, je suis un peu souffrante, et le médecin m'ordonne le repos. Je me coucherai de bonne heure ce soir et ne vous verrai pas. Mais, pour vous récompenser, je vous attendrai demain à midi. Je vous aime." (132)

name: *La Dame aux camélias* was written as a re-reading of this eighteenth-century novel through the lens of Dumas' life and times.²² Armand says, "Ce fut pendant ce temps-là," their summer at Bougival, after she leaves the duc for him, "qu'elle lut si souvent *Manon Lescaut*. Je la surpris bien des fois annotant ce livre : et elle me disait toujours que lorsqu'une femme aime, elle ne peut pas faire ce que faisait Manon" (166). Her annotation leaves a trace on the pages of the volume in her hand, and her critique of Manon summarizes what Dumas sought to illustrate with Marguerite. However this authorial stance is undone by the excessive presence of her body, mentioned above: "*Manon Lescaut* était ouvert sur la table. Il me sembla que d'endroits en endroits les pages étaient mouillées comme par des larmes" (198). The *courtisane*'s fluid body is once again readable, signifying her excess of emotion and functioning as the trace of her absence.

While there are scenes of all three narrators' writing processes, Marguerite is the character for whom the act of writing is most in conflict with the body. In the first letter from her that Armand shows the narrator, she lacks both the (masculine) strength and (seminal?) blood/ink to write at length:

"pardonnez-moi, mon ami, si je ne vous en écris pas plus long, mais ceux qui disent qu'ils me guériront m'épuisent de saignées, et ma main se refuse à écrire davantage.

'Marguerite Gautier'

En effet, les derniers mots étaient à peine lisibles." (46)

The blood that would leave the trace of her illness on her napkin is unable to leave a stable trace of her name, her identity as an individual. That her signature is rendered almost unreadable by

²² See Eliane Lecarme-Tabone's concise study of *Manon Lescaut* as a hypotext and palimpsest for *La Dame aux camélias* (*Romantisme* 72.II, 1992).

the blood-letting prescribed by her doctors is remedied only by the frame narrator who publishes Armand's story and by the resulting book's typesetters.

In her letters, compiled at the end of the volume, there is a second mention that the act of writing exacerbates her illness: "Le médecin a ordonné qu'on ne me laissât pas toucher une plume. Julie Duprat, qui me veille, me permet encore de vous écrire ces quelque lignes" (238). But this resistance is limited. It cannot be ignored that her writing is allowed within a small community of women, Marguerite and Julie forming an alliance against the male doctor's orders. Moreover, the physical exertion of writing can only result in expediting her death, a fact further underscored by the multiple announcements of her death that have appeared throughout the novel.

Furthermore, "le journal de [sa] vie," her only extensive writing following her rupture with Armand, serves in part to alienate her from herself, finally rendering her as a fiction, even to herself. In the first letter presented in the novel, written after the vast majority of the events of the central narrative have taken place, Marguerite figures herself already dead at the moment of her reader's future contact with her letter, which she writes not for herself but to redeem herself in Armand's esteem. Then, she shifts from the first- to the third-person to talk about herself: "Pauvre ami ! votre Marguerite d'autrefois est bien changée, et il vaut peut-être mieux que vous ne la revoyiez plus que de la voir telle qu'elle est" (45). Finally, this alienated writing is ultimately inseparable from its author's venal nature in its use by the narrator: "Si l'intérêt que vous prenez à moi est réel, Armand, à votre retour, allez chez Julie Duprat. Elle vous remettra ce journal. Vous y trouverez la raison et l'excuse de ce qui s'est passé entre nous." (45)²³

²³ The pleasure of knowing her side of the story is announced at the beginning, but deferred until the end. Cf. Goulemot, op. cit.

The art of containment

In spite of his affection for her, in addition to confirming Marguerite's contagious nature, Armand seeks to contain her: after failing in his attempts to keep her in her apartment after her convalescence, he proposes removing her from Paris:

Il semble que, si indifférente qu'elle soit à ce qui l'entoure, la femme aimée perde de son parfum et de son unité au contact des hommes et des choses. [...] A] Paris, à chaque pas, je pouvais coudoyer un homme qui avait été l'amant de cette femme ou qui le serait le lendemain. Tandis qu'à la campagne, au milieu des gens que nous n'avions jamais vus [...] au sein d'une nature toute parée de son printemps, [...] je pouvais cacher mon amour et aimer sans honte et sans crainte. (157).

Marguerite is once again the unsealed bottle of perfume that Armand described earlier (88), whose permeability is exacerbated by her presence in Paris, that center of urban capitalism where there are so many different temptations that threaten to re-contaminate her and seduce her back to her old life as a *courtisane*. In the country, Marguerite would be removed from the sight of people and protected from the seductions of city life. There, she can remain as innocent as the virginal spring. Thus Armand paradoxically hides his lover in order to love without shame.²⁴ And yet, when Marguerite writes letters to her friend/*entremetteuse* Prudence—letters effectively locked away from Armand's view—in order to sell her possessions, the trappings of her venal life continue to circulate in Paris in spite of her supposed confinement in the countryside.

Country confinement also drains Marguerite of the spirit that Armand loves. What he describes as “une charmante petite maison à deux étages, avec une grille en hemicircle” (158), Marguerite sees as the mausoleum of a martyr: “Et pour qui donc viendrais-je m'enterrer là, si ce

²⁴ This is an idea that parallels, in some ways, Parent's suggestions that arrested prostitutes should be transported through the city hidden in covered wagons in order not to offend the innocent or that so long as sewage was contained within the bowels of the city, waste could be rendered healthy and “clean.”

n'est pour vous ?" (159). And she does indeed languish with the end of summer. So, in spite of what appears to be her real moral improvement, Armand proposes that they move back to Paris. But his efforts are again concentrated on keeping Marguerite hidden and confined: they settle on "un petit pavillon, isolé de la maison principale." What he likes best about it is this: "Derrière ce petit pavillon s'étendait un jardin charmant, jardin qui en dépendait, entouré de murailles assez élevées pour nous séparer de nos voisins, et assez basses pour ne pas borner la vue" (180-181). This apartment, however, proves penetrable by men (and women) who restore Marguerite to her former lifestyle.

These examples of Armand's failed efforts to contain Marguerite suggest both imprisonment and quarantine, the two interconnected systems used to deal with the problem of prostitution in Paris. While I do not believe that Dumas was overtly critical of these systems at the time, they do point out—to today's informed reader—the erasure of the legal and medical institutions that sought to disguise their disciplinary power by enacting it in a natural environment: relegating the business of the reform of prostituted woman to the countryside and the garden.

It is also significant that the sentimental hero's efforts at containment prove insufficient in the end. Armand appears impotent yet again, this time in his failure of will: he gives in to Marguerite's wishes and restores her to urban life. As we have seen in the section above, Armand is himself lacking in masculine strength and solidity. The frame narrator uses narrative strategies that attempt to contain both Armand and Marguerite, but with mixed results. The only person in the book who successfully contains and redirects the flow of contagious, diseased and sexually out-of-control bodies is Armand's father, whom—I propose—is the figure of Dumas' ideal author. It is the (Law of the) Father who will facilitate, through his very writing, the final

containment and siphoning off of both Marguerite's and Armand's excessive corporeal fluids: "Il fallait une barrière infranchissable, pour l'un comme pour l'autre." (230)

As I mentioned above, the ideal author leaves only an entirely un-embodied, scriptural trace: the narrative must prove able to contain and master all forms of desire, sexual excess, and contagion. Who can do this? In all three narrations, the result of Marguerite's over-determined "liquid" and contagious nature (a combined expression, I would argue, of Dumas' point of view) is that she is *too* embodied—too profoundly female in all regards—to merit recognition as a writer. The collection of objects that she owned are washed of any individual story once she dies; her signature flowers tell only a cyclical tale of her embodiment as a woman; her presence, like perfume, evaporates, and her decomposed body—which briefly exerts such a powerful effect on Armand—is ultimately reburied and neutralized. The only stable trace she leaves is the collection of letters to Armand, but these are coded as "feminine" and venal: just as embodied, diseased and ephemeral as the physical traces left by her body.

Armand's traces, too, are too visibly the result of his excessive sexual desire. Looking more closely at his letters reveals that he is unable to write anything that does not communicate to Marguerite—an adept reader of male sexual need—the reality that his intended meaning is the exact opposite of that expressed by his words on the page.

The delicious problem with Prevost's *Manon Lescaut* is that while the narrator presents it as a cautionary tale, ostensibly to warn readers against the power of desire for frivolous pleasure, it is Manon who is the most enduring part of the novel and who most strongly evokes the reader's admiration. She consistently eludes the repressive forces of 18th-century Paris, escaping from convent, prison, family (embodied by her criminal brother); sent to America as a prisoner of the State, she thereby even evades national boundaries and the Church's order of traditional

marriage. Such wide circulation of one woman is either unimaginable or too upsetting in 1840's Paris, ruled as it was by the booming bourgeois class, underpinned by developing ideas of separate spheres and an enclosed, domestic femininity.

In his rewriting of *Manon*, Dumas separates the *courtisane*'s attractiveness (and the appeal of her revolutionary narrative) from her ability to circulate in the public sphere.²⁵ He then couples her allure with her need for moral redemption, which can only be acquired via the receipt of another's pity. Manon's independence is replaced by Marguerite's dependence on an "other." This "other" is necessarily an authorial figure. Dumas' seeks to contain Marguerite far better than Prévost contained Manon: he does so by making a fiction, a book, of her person, even within the reality of the diegetic world. The modern *courtisane*'s containment hereby exceeds the limitations of her physical circulation. This begins in the frame narrative, and is echoed in Duval's first-person narration, which we shall return to shortly. Dumas' valorization of the *courtisane* was "tolerable" because the story of her life and death serves to call Armand Duval's voice into existence and to establish the narrator as an author.²⁶ This is analogous to Charles Bernheimer's claim that, in Eugène Sue and (by comparison) Balzac, the authorial figure, "the model of enlightened behavior [...] thrives on plotting the elimination of characters whose erotically charged deviance provides the plot [...] with its most narratable story lines. But these two apparently opposed plots are really one, deviance being tolerable only so long as it provokes the appropriate counter-discipline" (51).

From the very first physical description that the reader gets of the title character, there is an underlying emphasis on keeping her contained, and out of public view. Her "distinction peu

²⁵ See Naomi Schor, *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction*, New York: Columbia UP, 1987.

²⁶ But this is supposed to pass unseen, undiscussed. The frame narrator writes, "j'ai une indulgence inépuisable pour les courtisanes, et je ne me donne même pas la peine de discuter cette indulgence" (26).

commune à ses semblables,” and her “beauté vraiment exceptionnelle” is remarkable from a distance, but curiously lacking in details; her most exceptional characteristic is her *invisibility*: “Elle arrivait aux Champs-Élysée toujours seule, dans sa voiture, où elle s’effaçait le plus possible” (27). Dumas’ *courtisane* thus appears to self-regulate from the beginning, enacting on her own body the police regulation of prostitutes during Dumas’ time. The primary strategy of this regulation, as Alain Corbin and Charles Bernheimer have demonstrated, was “to control the visibility of purchasable women” (Bernheimer 16). Thus, even the popular and voyeuristic *roman de la prostitution*, as a member of the category of “novel,” a genre recognized in the eighteenth-century as a respectable and viable artistic endeavor, must be read for its engagement in the debate about the power and legitimacy of art.

The second physical description of Marguerite demonstrates the fact that art alone can “siphon off” the *courtisane*’s venality. An ekphrastic reproduction of a portrait by Vincent Vidal serves as a bounded frame through which the woman can be safely communicated. The novel’s reader is transformed into the appreciative artist, or perhaps his apprentice, by the narrator’s use of the imperative:

Dans un ovale d’une grâce indescriptible, mettez des yeux noirs surmontés d’un arc si pur qu’il semblait peint ; voilez ces yeux de grands cils qui, lorsqu’ils s’abaissent, jetaient de l’ombre sur la teinte rose des joues ; tracez un nez fin, droit, spirituel, aux narines un peu ouvertes par une aspiration ardente vers la vie sensuelle ; dessinez une bouche régulière, [...] colorez la peau [...] et vous aurez l’ensemble de cette charmante tête. (28-29)

The only detail on this beautiful head that could suggest a questionable *mode de vie* is the diamond earrings, “d’une valeur de quatre à cinq mille francs chacun” (29). The difference between the medium of narrative and portraiture is, of course, that the latter cannot speak to the

artist's knowledge of things such as the price of diamond earrings... or the impure nature of their origin.

Thus, the narrator feigns incomprehension in the presence of sexually charged signs:²⁷

“Comment sa vie ardente laissait-elle au visage de Marguerite l'expression virginale, enfantine même qui le caractérisait, c'est ce que nous sommes forcés de constater sans le comprendre” (29). Here, he purports not to understand how the sexuality required by her livelihood is *not* readable on her face. Yet a few sentences later, he claims a similar ignorance when presenting a sign clearly indicative of her sexual availability: the bouquet of camellias she carries to the theatre every night. “Pendant vingt-cinq jours du mois, les camélias étaient blancs, et pendant cinq ils étaient rouges ; on n'a jamais su la raison de cette variété de couleurs, que je signale sans pouvoir l'expliquer, et que les habitués des théâtres où elle allait le plus fréquemment et ses amis avaient remarquée comme moi” (29-30). Now, it cannot be said that Dumas' narrator was genuinely baffled by this sign of Marguerite's menstrual cycle: the hero understands it easily, and makes it clear in his first-person account of his initial encounter with her.²⁸ And the color code of the *courtisane's* supposedly defining bouquet escaped the notice of some of Dumas' peers: Jules Janin, in a description of Alphonsine Plessis published in an 1851 preface, said he paid no attention to a detail as unimportant as the color of the beautiful woman's bouquet.²⁹ It seems that the visible sign of Marguerite's sexual availability is purposefully first included only

²⁷ I choose to emphasize the feint of this incomprehension, in accordance with other critics. Naomi Segal, for example, says this passage “signifies his [Armand's] failure to accede to her sex (in either sense)” (41). Note on “Our Lady of the Flowers,” *French Studies Bulletin* 11.41 (1991), p. 5-8.

²⁸ “—Parce que, dit Marguerite en se dégageant de mes bras et en prenant dans un gros bouquet de camélias rouges apportés le matin, un camélia qu'elle passa à ma boutonnière, parce qu'on ne peut pas toujours exécuter les traités le jour où on les signe.» C'est facile à comprendre.” (102)

²⁹ “Elle tenait à la main un bouquet : de quelle couleur ? je ne saurais le dire ; il faut avoir les yeux d'un jeune homme et l'imagination d'un enfant pour bien distinguer la couleur de la fleur sur laquelle se penche un beau visage. A notre âge on ne regarde que la joue et l'éclat du regard, on s'inquiète peu de l'accessoire, et si l'on s'amuse à tirer des conséquences, on les tire de la personne même, et l'on se trouve assez occupé, en vérité” (251).

in order to subsequently be dramatically erased. The erasure of the venal is the trace of the artist, the aesthetically-minded reader. This is what will allow the narrator to comment at length on her death (which should pass barely noticed, “sans éclat” [27]): “je regrettais la mort de cette fille comme on regrette la destruction totale d’une belle œuvre” (28).

The Basis of Profitable Books: Inheritance and Interest

La Dame aux camélias was an immediate bestseller. It launched Dumas *fils*’ identity if not his career.³⁰ He would later often refer to it as his debut work.³¹ However it was neither his first published writing (a short book of verse, *Péchés de jeunesse*, appeared in 1847), nor even his first novel: a certain *Aventures de quatre femmes* was published in six volumes, four of which were in circulation by 1846, by Librairie Cadot, the same publisher that would print *La Dame aux camélias*. In fact, in 1847, a case was brought before the Seine tribunal claiming that *Aventures* was actually written by Dumas *père*. The case did not hold and the son responded that same year in the preface to the fifth volume in defense of the work as his.³² Yet in a letter to the editor of *Le Moniteur universel* in 1888, he describes this earlier novel as *following* the release of *La Dame*.

Perhaps the public conflation of his own work with that of his father contributed to the young writer’s desire to define himself as a successful author inside the very novel over which he was then laboring. At the same time, we recognize in this work a desire to create his own

³⁰ The 1851 theatrical version really made his career; later critics would say that the writing style “du vrai Dumas” began with *La Dame aux camélias* (Claye).

³¹ See the letter to M. Morel, cited in the entry on “Dumas fils,” by Georges Vicaire, *Manuel de l’amateur de livres du XIX^{ème} siècle, 1801-1893*, tome III, Paris: F. Douin, 1897, p. 447-497. See also an article by M. d’Eylac (pseud. Baron de Claye), supposedly published in *Le Bulletin du Bibliophile*, février 1896, pp. 54-59.

³² Dumas writes in the preface to volume V of *Aventures*: “[...] ce que je sais, moi, c’est que je ne signe pas les romans du mien [mon père], pour deux raisons : la première, c’est que, pour faire des romans mauvais, je les ferais bien tout seul ; la seconde, c’est que mon père n’en fait pas.” Dated February 10, 1847.

heritage, a fact that may issue from his self-identification as an illegitimate child, even though his father officially recognized him at age seven. But these autobiographical explanations are overly simple. The narrator's identification with Hugo and Musset in addition to his biological father shows that Dumas imagines a writer's heritage on a slightly wider scope, but one which does not exceed the ideology of primogeniture, a point we will return to later. For now, let us examine the effect of Dumas' choice to re-write *Manon Lescaut*, which places him squarely in the literary lineage of Prévost.

In addition to inscribing the well-loved eighteenth-century novel as both an object and a palimpsest in his work, Dumas repeats, in part, Prévost's narrative structure: a frame narrator serves as interlocutor and scribe for Duval's story of illicit but pure love, and as archivist not only for the pair's correspondence but also for Marguerite's journal. The narrative arc is familiar: the happiness of the fallen woman redeemed by true love is sacrificed to the restoration of social order. This inscribes Marguerite's retreat from Parisian society and her solitary surrender to tuberculosis in her Parisian *grenier* onto Manon's peregrinations through France and her death in the American wilderness. In the end, Duval, like des Grieux, returns to his father's good graces, and his proper social milieu, to recover from his bout of illicit love a wiser—and more family-oriented—man.³³

Dumas' modernization departs from its eighteenth-century model in that the framing narrative, and its unnamed narrator, underlines its truth through the contemporaneity of the novel's events, and his exclusive knowledge thereof, rather than their exemplary usefulness as

³³ The narrator portrays Armand at the center of the final home-coming scene, where he was received by his father and innocent sister: "Je restai quelque temps dans cette heureuse famille, tout occupée de celui qui leur apportait la convalescence de son cœur." (247)

moral instruction as Prévost's *homme de qualité* had done.³⁴ The narrator tells us, "D'ailleurs, il y a à Paris des témoins de la plupart des faits que je recueille ici, et qui pourraient les confirmer, si mon témoignage ne suffisait pas. Par une circonstance particulière, seul je pouvais les écrire, car seul j'ai été le confident des derniers détails sans lesquels il eût été impossible de faire un récit intéressant et complet" (17). The narrator recalls the Romantic poetic genius in his exceptional status, the journalist in that he employs witnesses to confirm his story, and the novelist seeking his editor's approval regarding "un récit intéressant et complet": thus while *La Dame aux camélias* was not destined to be serialized in a newspaper, its reader is assured all the same that it is "intéressant,"— interesting, profitable, and already completed, ready for immediate sale.

What follows this opening further confirms that the literary market of the July Monarchy is as much a part of the novel's truth as the narrator's stated concern for the detrimental effects of prostitution on women's roles as daughters, wives and mothers. The novel's action begins with an account of the estate sale following the *courtisane*'s death at which the narrator purchases a book: a luxury edition of *Manon Lescaut*, "parfaitement relié, doré sur tranche," that, as we learn later, had been given to her by Armand Duval. The announcement of the sale, the examination of the items up for auction, and the auction itself are situated between sympathetic sketches—stock tales, really—of two prostitutes, one a daughter and one a mother, and a summary of Marguerite Gautier's life prior to meeting Armand. Thus, from the novel's outset, the story of one book's commercial interest is framed by accounts of venal women. Seeing the *courtisane*'s tales as frame reveals the production of a novel as one of the work's primary subjects.

³⁴ Dumas' narrator does, at the end, return to the notion of his tale as exemplary, but only to underline its uniqueness, rather than its usefulness: "Je revins à Paris où j'écrivis cette histoire telle qu'elle m'avait été racontée. Elle n'a qu'un mérite qui lui sera peut-être contesté, celui d'être vraie.

Je ne tire pas de ce récit la conclusion que toutes les filles comme Marguerite sont capables de faire ce qu'elle a fait ; loin de là, mais j'ai connaissance qu'une d'elle avait éprouvé dans sa vie un amour sérieux, qu'elle en avait souffert et qu'elle en était morte. [...] L'histoire de Marguerite est une exception, je le répète ; mais si c'eût été une généralité, ce n'eût pas été la peine de l'écrire." (247).

Dumas' defense of the venal body containing a noble heart reverses the metaphor in the expression "don't judge a book by its cover." The second sketch of the arrest of a *fille* ends with, "Depuis ce jour, je n'ai plus su mépriser une femme à première vue" (26). This conclusion follows and contradicts the narrator's explicit refusal to apologize for his attitude toward Marguerite only three sentences earlier: "j'ai une indulgence inépuisable pour les courtisanes, et je ne me donne même pas la peine de discuter de cette indulgence" (26). Followed to its slightly absurd conclusion, the analogy is one between the first glimpse of a venal woman and the cover, or the purported subject matter, of the *courtisane*'s tale that the reader holds in his hands.

In fact, the auction scene draws attention to the contrast between this book, the physical "body" of Dumas' work of contemporary literature, the printed volume that the novel's author could anticipate for the physical exterior of *La Dame aux camélias*, and the object containing the proven literary masterpiece, *Manon Lescaut*. Would Dumas' supposedly well-intended work be consumed and cast off, like the public women described in the two sketches? Or would it attain a superior, exceptional status, like Marguerite? A desire for superiority, for recognition of this "debut" novel as an enduring work of art, becomes clear in the material nature of the scene describing the narrator's contact with Prévost's novel. The book containing Manon Lescaut's tale is described as follows: "Un volume, parfaitement relié, doré sur tranche, intitulé 'Manon Lescaut'" (35).³⁵ The book is a unified whole, contained and adorned by a proper binding, with gilded edges to provide protection and decoration, and clearly identified by a proper name. This object clearly belongs in a well-ordered personal library.

Having worked with the Cadot press for the publication of the *Aventure de quatre femmes*, Dumas would have known that his own book, *La Dame aux camélias*, would be printed

³⁵ For more on book collecting in the nineteenth century, and its entrance in literature, see Daniel Desormeaux, *La Figure du bibliomane: histoire du livre et stratégie littéraire au XIXe siècle*, Saint-Genouph, France: Librairie Nizet, 2001.

on “papier plus qu’ordinaire,” in *in-octavio* format,³⁶ in two volumes, and given only the inexpensive plain yellow cover (Claye PP), as was routine for books destined mostly for purchase by *cabinets de lecture*, where many paying customers would carelessly handle the volume in succession. The first *tirage* was 1200 copies, an average number, nothing that would interest the bibliophile. In contrast, the fictional volume of *Manon Lescaut* contains a mysterious dedication that makes it unique; Dumas’ narrator buys it for 100 francs, ten times its initial asking price. This action silences the previously noisy auction attendees, and identifies him as a bibliophile before he even officially becomes the author-as-recipient of Armand Duval’s narrative.

For the reader to be holding the volume *La Dame aux camélias*, we must assume that this bibliophile succeeded in writing up and publishing Duval’s story, as he was instructed by the hero himself: Duval says to him, when beginning his account of his relationship with Marguerite, “Il faut pourtant que je vous raconte cette histoire; vous en ferez un livre auquel on ne croira pas, mais qui sera peut-être intéressant à faire.” (66). The ambiguity of the word “intéressant,” returns, connoting not only “of interest” to a reading audience but also “financially beneficial.” The hero here identifies the frame narrator as an invested professional writer, echoing the narrator’s earlier use of “interest” in the introductory frame. Duval is “pitching” his story to the narrator just as the narrator pitched it to *his* reader, presumably a person well aware of the notion of literature as a profitable enterprise.

In addition to setting himself apart as a bibliophile, it appears important that the narrator’s choice to write this story be seen as serious business. The passage leading up to the

³⁶ In *Balzac, imprimeur et défenseur du livre*, Roger Pierrot says that the usual format for the novel (at least in 1829) was in-12, but that the in-8° format was the ‘format de la littérature sérieuse’ (56). This will have changed by 1848, such that an in-8° could be considered ‘vulgaire.’ Or it is possible that it is just the cover that is cheap, with the assumption that the buyer will recover it.

purchase of *Manon Lescaut* situates the narrator, a self-declared “amateur de curiosités,” (18) precariously among other “curieux” (33).³⁷ Yet a mocking tone and a society-insider’s use of initials establishes his narrative mastery over the heteroclitic collective of celebrities, both famous and infamous, united in the salon of the deceased *courtisane*. His mordant description begins with mismatched pairs in stable binaries of proper and improper: the auction juxtaposes a duchess and a *courtisane*, a marquise and an adulteress. But then, the extravagant duc d’Y... is paired with both “une de nos plus spirituelles conteuses” and a “promeneuse.” The juxtaposition renders both women suspect, for it raises the question of whether the woman writer who dares sign her own name, might be just as deviant as the public woman who paid for the most expensive horses in Paris by laying on her back.

However, what *is* clear is the narrator’s insistence that he is merely a disinterested observer in this salon,³⁸ while he will claim membership in the one shared by Hugo, Massenet, and Dumas, *père* that he imagines in the passage at the beginning of this chapter. That his presumed authority over haughty society women and *le demi-monde* alike encompasses the

³⁷ This description of the auction attendees, in its entirety, from which the phrases are excerpted in the text that follows above:

L’appartement était plein de curieux.

Il y avait là toutes les célébrités du vice élégant, sournoisement examinées par quelques grandes dames qui avaient pris encore une fois le prétexte de la vente, pour avoir le droit de voir de près des femmes avec qui elles n’auraient jamais eu occasion de se retrouver, et dont elles enviaient peut-être en secret les faciles plaisirs.

Mme la duchesse de F... coudoyait Mlle A..., une des plus tristes épreuves de nos courtisanes modernes ; Mme la marquise de T... hésitait pour acheter un meuble sur lequel enchérissait Mme D..., la femme adultère la plus élégante et la plus connue de notre époque ; le duc d’Y..., qui passe à Madrid pour se ruiner à Paris, à Paris pour se ruiner à Madrid, et qui, somme toute, ne dépense même pas son revenu, tout en causant avec Mme M..., une de nos plus spirituelles conteuses qui veut bien de temps en temps écrire ce qu’elle dit et signer ce qu’elle écrit, échangeait des regards confidentiels avec Mme de N..., cette belle promeneuse des Champs-Élysées, presque toujours vêtue de rose ou de bleu et qui fait trainer sa voiture par deux grands chevaux noirs, que Tony lui a vendus dix mille francs et... qu’elle lui a payés [...]. (22-23)

³⁸ There is a repeated assurance that the narrator can circulate as an objective observer in questionable circles without risking his health or reputation: “Moi qui ne m’effarouchais pas à la vue du cabinet de toilette d’une femme entretenue, je m’amusais à examiner les détails, quels qu’ils fussent, et je m’aperçus que tous ces ustensiles magnifiquement ciselés portaient des initiales variés et des couronnes différentes” (23).

woman writer—even though this work would seem to be the young narrator’s own first foray into writing³⁹—suggests that like Balzac and Stendhal, Dumas’ narrator is yet one more illustration of Margaret Cohen’s argument that male authors in the realist tradition “made bids for their market shares in a hostile take over of the dominant practice of the novel when [they] started writing: sentimental works by women writers” (6). It likewise reflects the state of the market at the end of the July Monarchy, in which, as Cohen shows, ideological and legal limitations worked together to exclude women from the literary marketplace (192).

For now, let us concede that it is Dumas’ position as a distinctly mid-century writer-turned-editor or even publisher—rather than his moral position, as was the case for Prévost’s *homme de qualité*—that guarantees his relationship to his reader and thereby his authority. Dumas’ fluency in the exchange value of literature is not only inseparable from his narrative authority, but is, in fact, the sign of it. The analogy of the luxury book to fiat currency is made by the fact that it is the gift of *Manon Lescaut* to its original giver that initiates the account of the love story that the narrator would later publish in his own interest. This creates yet another contrast—a class difference—with Prévost’s narrator, an *homme de qualité* whose apparent independent wealth is what affords him both the ability to give Des Grieux the gold coins that initiated his recounting of his tale and the disinterested authority with which the narrator writes.

Much later, in an impassioned speech at a climactic moment in the tale, the heroine herself affirms this awareness of the profitability of this narrative as she inadvertently points back to her two male narrators: “Tous ceux qui entourent les filles comme moi ont *intérêt* à scruter leurs moindres paroles [...]. Nous ne nous appartenons plus. Nous ne sommes pas des êtres, mais des choses” (148 emphasis added). As we have seen, structurally, both Armand’s oral

³⁹ The novel’s second line reads, “N’ayant pas encore l’âge où l’on invente, je me contente de raconter” (17).

account and the frame narrator's published book *entourent* the *courtisane*: they both surround and act to contain Marguerite and her words. The practice of scrutinizing—of hearing, recording and editing the *courtisanes'* words—is a reifying act of writing through re-reading. This is the business of the two men relating her tale. Like the luxury edition of *Manon Lescaut*, Marguerite exists merely to be admired, purchased and re-read. Any redemptive portrayal of the woman herself that may result is equated with the author's own *intérêt*, with his attention, his amusement and his financial gain.

Conclusion

Just as the binding of the luxury volume of *Manon Lescaut* both contains and adds value to the eighteenth-century tale of venality, *La Dame aux camélias* undertakes to demonstrate that it is possible to successfully invent oneself as the sort of *grand auteur* able to keep a salacious subject within a controllable circulation. In so doing, however, Dumas *filis'* novel exposes the fact that the very possibility of making a name for oneself is inextricably linked to the threat of contamination in the new capitalist market. The liquids that I have considered here as traces—blood, tears, semen, ink—undermine Dumas' optimism, exposing presence in absence as a double-sided coin: on the one hand, a trace like a novel can put into circulation the signature of the suddenly-renowned author, whose work will circulate on its own, separate from his father's name, potentially increasing in value with every exchange; on the other hand, the entire narrative—the structure and all three narrators—repeats, *ad nauseam*, a warning against the infectious, corruptive power of objects of desire allowed to circulate *ad infinitum*.

The desirable body of the *courtisane* is, in essence, merely another object to possess, contain, diagnose, narrate, paint, frame and master. Armand's hysterical, sexually impotent body

exposes the fact that the deeper cause for concern is desire itself. Thus, while Marguerite is in fact dead from the beginning and hence ostensibly “out of circulation,” no account of her redemption could ever negate that which most equates her body to the sewers: the disgusting truth that entry into the flow of capitalism objectifies all those who come into contact with the things that inflame, rather than satisfy, their desire. If Marguerite’s writing can only gesture back to her dangerous body, it is because, for Dumas, she is the embodiment of the undesirable underside of the trace: one can only control the circulation of something that is in one’s possession. And narrative, once published, is no longer under authorial control.

Is there anything that *can* protect a name from the harmful effects of circulation? Perhaps: the ultimate message of Dumas’ novel is that the ability to control profit is the true crux of the ideal author’s authority. While the frame narrator remains nameless, he has something as powerful as the kind of name (*nom*), or rather renown (*renomée*), that Hugo, Balzac, Dumas père, had: he has capital. And this means he already has everything he needs to satisfy his own ambition. The corollary of Prévost’s *homme de qualité*, Dumas *fil*s’ frame narrator, while young, has enough spare time and surplus capital to buy a book at ten times its established exchange value, and to get the story behind it published. He also has a wealth of what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital”: the aesthetic distance from the subject matter of a work of art, guaranteed by the education befitting a man of his economic standing. Capital, the cause and effect of his education, allows him to place the powerful institutions of science and art between himself and the object of his reader’s desire. The question remains: will it be enough?

Dumas *fil*s, like the frame narrator, insists on entering into the flowing mire of the capitalist literary market by attaching his name to a *courtisane*’s tale and putting it into circulation. Like the frame narrator, he profits from telling a story that was not entirely of his

own invention, banking—as he did—on the preexisting capital of both Prévost’s novel and Marie Duplessis’ renown. The edition of the book that the frame narrator purchased was an object that symbolically represents not only the *courtisane*, her lover, and their story of interest, but also “ce quelque chose d’écrit”: indeed, the luxury novel circulates in the book as the very trace of profit, the ultimate double-sided coin. Fame and fortune, the ideal product of ambition in a capitalist world, commodifies the author even as it makes a name for him.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROSTITUTION, CENSORSHIP, LITERACY AND OTHER EXCLUSIVE DISCOURSES IN
EARLY NATURALIST NOVELS

An art critic and a five-franc whore walk in to the Louvre. If you just interpreted that sentence as the set-up for a joke, you probably grew up in a society dominated by Western white middle-class values: you have acquired enough cultural capital to know that the Louvre is an art museum, enough snobbery to presume that a prostitute would not share a critic's sensibility for the "high" art housed there, and an expectation that a departure from social norms—on the part of either party—is a potential source of embarrassment, that staple of middle-class situational humor. The invisibility of the role that class plays today in something as seemingly individualized as humor—or aesthetic taste—is due, in part, to ideologies governing "high" and "low" culture that came to be naturalized over the course of the nineteenth century.

In this chapter, I examine three *romans de la prostitution* published in the early years of the Third Republic that would have confirmed their readers' expectations that a common prostitute prove ignorant in the presence of art and literature. I demonstrate how these novels—*Marthe, histoire d'une fille* (1876) by J.-K. Huysmans, *La Fille Elisa* (1877) by Edmond de Goncourt, and *Nana* (1880) by Emile Zola—use the figure of the culturally illiterate prostitute in order to produce aesthetic disinterestedness as an alternative to capitalist desire as a sign of membership in a social elite.

But first, let us consider—as a condensed illustration of my point—the aforementioned scene of the whore at the Louvre. It is not, in fact, (just) the setup for a joke, but the basis of a pointed commentary by Charles Baudelaire on art, class, and power. The mid-century poet and art critic calls on the rules of middle class humor in order to ridicule Imperial censors:

Tous les imbéciles de la Bourgeoisie qui prononcent sans cesse les mots : “immoral, immoralité, moralité dans l'art” et autres bêtises, me font penser à Louise Villedieu, putain à cinq francs, qui m'accompagnant une fois au Louvre, où elle n'était jamais allée, se mit à rougir, à se couvrir le visage, et me tirant à chaque instant par la manche, me demandait devant les statues et les tableaux immortels comment on pouvait étaler publiquement de pareilles indécences.¹

At the most basic level, the low-class prostitute represents the increasingly ubiquitous urban masses. Baudelaire's point is that the critics railing against modern art are—in spite of their bourgeois education—still as dumb as a working woman of the lowest class who had never before been to a museum.

Over a century later, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would be hailed as a groundbreaking scholar for revealing the implicit connection between art appreciation and class that seems to have been quite obvious to the poet. In his influential 1979 work, *La Distinction, critique sociale du jugement*, Bourdieu describes aesthetic judgment as a product of a person's internalized class-based value system, a worldview that remains constant, even in the face of formal schooling and professional success. Thus, an individual's reaction to a work of art, Bourdieu reports, positions him or her in a rigid hierarchy rendered otherwise invisible by the seemingly democratic access to education and wealth, the tools of social mobility in a capitalist republic.² That is to say, the

¹ This comment appears in *Mon coeur mis à nu*, one of the author's fragmentary works, written between 1848 and 1864, containing ideas to perhaps be expanded upon later. “Fragment 56 (XLVI),” *Mon coeur mis à nu. Oeuvres complètes*, tome I, Paris: Editions de la Pléiade, 1975. p. 707.

² “...inheritance of cultural wealth which has been accumulated and bequeathed by previous generations only really belongs (although it is theoretically offered to anyone) to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves. [...] apprehension and possession of cultural goods as symbolic goods [...] are possible only for those who hold the code making it possible to decipher them or, in other words, that the appropriation of symbolic goods presupposes the possession of the instruments of appropriation...” *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 170.

lower one's class of origin, the more likely one is to perceive a representation purely in terms of the subject's use value.

Conversely, says Bourdieu, identifying with a more elevated position in society—a higher class or class fraction—is strongly correlated with a sensibility that assumed a distinction existed between the cultural value of a given work of art and the use value of the subject it depicted. At least, this was the case by the time that Bourdieu began his investigation in the mid-twentieth century. Such a correlation did not necessarily exist before it became possible for a prostitute to actually occupy the same space as typical connoisseurs of classical-period paintings. That is to say, before the nineteenth century—when art became a commodity to be consumed in a capitalist economy, a universally accessible object in a democratic state—the value of a work of art depended more on the artist's craft than the audience's reception. Could metaphorical depictions of prostitution—like Baudelaire's and others'—have played a role in making aesthetic distance a sign of the social elite? Absolutely. But how? Let us stay with the Baudelaire citation for another moment to see.

In the scene in the Louvre, the poet shows the dynamic link between art, values and class. The Bourgeoisie categorized works of art as morally “bad” for depicting subjects that, in real life, did not demonstrate middle-class values. However, the poet implies, it is not the choice of subject, but merely of medium that the critics object to; and this, it seems, is an insult to artists. The ironic image that Baudelaire paints—the public woman blushing before a nude statue—draws attention to the hypocrisy of the critics claiming to be offended by contemporary works of art that depicted aspects of their everyday modern life. The daily newspapers were full of salacious crime stories, reports of women arrested for soliciting, and detailed accounts of court proceedings. Access to these inexpensive representations of reality was practically universal.

However, news stories were dismissed as less disruptive than serial novels depicting the same sort of events on account of the use value of ephemeral media: in a bourgeois value system, daily reporting did not serve the same function as eternal works of art, like paintings and poems.

Baudelaire's choice to pair "immoral" and "immortel" as opposing qualifiers for two works of identical caliber—"Tous les imbéciles de la Bourgeoisie qui prononcent sans cesse les mots : "immoral, immoralité, moralité dans l'art"—both of which depict a truth about the reality of the artist's time—exposes the critics' discourse of morality as a control mechanism. Public offense, he believes, is merely a tool by which the new ruling class seeks to subject artists to their control. Censorship serves to appropriate the means of artistic production to the reproduction of a social hierarchy; it helps maintain "art" as an exclusive symbol of the (new) social elite, in spite of the elite's cultural illiteracy.

However, the critics were not alone in fitting the discourse of bourgeois morality to fit their purpose. Baudelaire is, in turn, categorizing critics as morally "bad" for denying artists their right to truthfully represent society. His comparison of the offended bourgeois critic to the ignorant working-class woman debases the former at the expense of the latter. Yet it is an effective rhetorical move that turns the critics' identification with the bourgeois value system against them. Now, Baudelaire was not particularly troubled by the presence of a prostitute at the Louvre.³ But he knew the snobby critics would have been: we cannot forget the anxieties about consumption—connoting both disease and the satisfaction of commercial desire—that a woman

³ Baudelaire's association with venal women is well-known: in particular, Jeanne Duval, who worked as a prostitute at times, and the *courtisane* Mme Sabatier. As a recurring figure in his writing, the public woman is the compliment of the *flâneur*, the man whose anonymous presence in the crowds makes the modern city into a spectacle for his enjoyment as a consumer. See Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses - Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique*, Grenoble: ELLUG, 2007. The prostitute's appearance in a museum, a space that allows circulation within a socially diverse, consuming public is, therefore, rather unremarkable. Baudelaire is far more concerned with those whom she represents: in his art criticism, he often comments on the lamentable commodification and commercialization of art as a direct result of the bourgeoisie's rise to power (see, for example, the 1846 Salon).

like Louise had come to embody in the bourgeois imagination since at least 1836.⁴ For Baudelaire, equating the “bad” critic with the public woman effectively communicates the poet’s derisive view of the bourgeois critics as a threat to the artistic purity and cultural stability of the French nation. While considering—from a safe, critical distance—the amusing image of the naïve prostitute, the Bourgeoisie suddenly finds itself collapsed, by the poet, with the object of its own exclusionary gaze.

And finally, in addition to degrading his opponent, Baudelaire’s choice to depict himself at the Louvre in the company of a prostitute helps assert the poet’s own position as that of a superior fraction within the middle class. The tension of the social inequality between the poet (who associates with prostitutes) and his patron/reader is momentarily diffused through the shared laughter triggered by the venal woman’s reassuring ignorance before the works of the grand masters. However, for the author of *Les Fleurs du mal*—who had been brought before the tribunal in 1857 and found guilty of *outrage aux bonnes mœurs*—censoring art on account of the immorality of its subject was no joking matter. The moment that his reader judges Baudelaire for tolerating, defending—even flaunting—the presence of a five-franc whore in a temple of French culture, the inequality returns, but reversed.

As philosopher Jacques Rancière has shown in—among other essays—*Le Partage du sensible: esthétique et poétique*, the realist turn is marked by the movement to accept all subjects as suitable for depiction within the realm of art, even as art, as such, retained its autonomy. While those so inclined to study it did not lose sight of Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet’s 1836 study on which the French regulatory system was built, during the early years of the new

⁴ On the equation of the prostitute with disease, see—among others—Mary Spongberg, *Feminizing Venereal Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse*. On the feminized image of the modern consumer see Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995. Because the prostitute was not only usually a woman, but a woman marked by excessive sexual desire, the analogy between marketing and seduction makes the line between the uncontrollable consumer and the unregistered prostitute all the blurrier.

Republic, they saw the publication of several new studies aimed at satisfying—or perhaps heightening—the public’s growing fascination with prostitution in modern Paris.⁵ Journalists joined in, reveling in the failures of the *Brigade des mœurs*—the agency responsible for maintaining the regulatory system: in spite of the exponential growth in staffing and budgetary requirements since the 1830s, it proved incapable of fulfilling its charge to register and impose medical exams on the city’s growing number of venal women, the majority of whom were working-class.⁶ While prostitution was a “tolerated” profession, women suspected of practicing it outside the regulatory system were routinely arrested for indecent exposure (*outrage aux mœurs*). Reports of the steady increase in such arrests only made the impotence of the *brigade des mœurs* more apparent. Thus, by the mid-1870s, due to a regular appearance in non-fiction, the “gritty,” clandestine prostitute had all but replaced the *courtisane* in the public imaginary as the primary expression of anxieties related to contagion, class mobility and the flow of capital. For Baudelaire, recalling Louise at the Louvre was part of a political maneuver that helped produce a modern aesthetic that privileges style over subject in the new paradigm that both denies and affirms a distinction between art and non-art. The prostitute, as a real subject and a rhetorical figure, both offends and reflects the bourgeois critics who confuse figurative and literal representations. As a rhetorical figure, the offended prostitute makes the censorial impulse itself a sign of membership in a lower class *and* a moral offense far more serious than that of shocking a few audience members, or even that of selling sex on the street. As a subject, her very presence

⁵ See, for example, Charles-Jérôme Lecour, *La Prostitution à Paris et à Londres, 1789-1870*, Paris: Pierre Asselin, 1871; Maxime du Camp, *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie dans la seconde moitié du xix^e siècle*, tome III, Paris: Hachette, 1872; Flevy d’Urville, *Les Ordures de Paris*, Paris: Sartorius, 1874; Pierre-Joseph Prudhon, *La Pornocratie, ou la Femme dans les temps modernes*, Paris: Lacroix, 1875.

⁶ For more on the growing inefficiency of this organization, the public’s frustration with its cost and corruption, and its eventual collapse under pressure from the press, see the concluding chapters of Jill Harsin’s study, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.

confirms the artist representing as necessarily part of a higher class-fraction, and opposes his cultural superiority to his critics' posturing of moral superiority.

In essence, reproducing the possibility that a public woman could come in contact with art effectively perpetuates the notion that democratic *access to* cultural capital—an inevitable result of its commodification under capitalism—is not a guarantee of *authority over* it. Moreover, making this prostitute representative of bourgeois critics who claim such authority serves to question the legitimacy of their efforts to control the means of artistic production. As we shall now see, Baudelaire was certainly not unique in imagining the modern, realist writer as being in a privileged position to define modern art, as knowing what it takes to understand it, and as articulating how censorship threatens it. The same issues of class, morality and art raised in his humorous, one-sentence commentary appear—but unsurprisingly, more nuanced—in the novel-length depictions of prostituted women who engage with texts of similar cultural value to the statues at the Louvre. In the rest of this chapter, we will see how literate prostitutes come to represent bad (that is, excessively desirous) readers. The narrator's authority over these women's stories transforms medical and judicial discourses into a form of aesthetic distance from the subject of a work of art that, as Bourdieu found, came to be indicative of the social elite. I also demonstrate that—in addition to the recognized discourses of medicine, law, psychology and aesthetics—these early Naturalists also appropriated censorship itself as a counter-discourse to democratizing literacy, both within and beyond their novels.

Reading the Literate Prostitute

As Mireille Dottin-Orsini and Daniel Grojnowski demonstrate in their anthology *Un joli monde: Romans de la prostitution*, a significant number of works—many by authors “de premier

ordre”—depicted “la putain, fille des bordels et des trottoirs,” particularly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (vi).⁷ These works, they propose, are so numerous and influential as to constitute a sub-genre, the *roman de la prostitution*. Within that sub-genre, there are a significant number of novels in which scenes of the women reading serve to reveal their internal state.⁸ As Noëlle Benhamou has aptly pointed out, not only do such scenes reflect stereotypes about both prostitutes and women readers, but, furthermore, “le personnage de la prostituée dévoreuse de livres, dont la vie est déjà un roman, amène surtout un jeu sur la création littéraire et une réflexion sur la mimésis” (168).⁹ I wish to add to this that novels in which the working-class prostitute appears as a consumer of art (visual and/or textual) as well as a subject of a commodified artistic representation play off the trope of the venal public writer in order to reframe the relationship between commercial demand and literary production.

The first of these is Joris-Karl Huysmans’ 1876 novel *Marthe, histoire d’une fille*, a bleak account of the cyclical life of a young working-class woman who turns to prostitution after other forms of labor fail to provide a decent income. Marthe circulates through all types of venality, from the street, to the brothel, to the stage; she cohabitates with a mediocre writer, is kept by a wealthy young lover, but finally ends up back *en maison*. She is depicted contemplating reproductions of paintings while her new lover aestheticizes her, a moment that precipitates her rejection of a career on stage.

Huysmans’ novel was first to press by only a few months: the subject was, so to speak, in the air. Edmond de Goncourt had also been working on his own novel about a registered

⁷ Page numbers given for citations from both Huysmans’ *Marthe, histoire d’une fille* and Goncourt’s *La Fille Elisa* refer to this anthology, heretofore abbreviated to *JM*.

⁸ In addition to the novels studied here, *romans de la prostitution* depicting prostitutes as readers include Maupassant, *Yvette* (1884); Léon Daudet, *Sapho* (1884); and Jean Lorrain, *La Maison Philibert* (1904).

⁹ “La Prostituée et le livre, fonctions du livre dans quelques romans de filles (1875-1905),” *Le Livre* 32 (2002), p. 167-182.

prostitute, *La Fille Elisa*, which appeared in January of 1877. The daughter of a midwife, Elisa runs away to enter a brothel in the country, then moves to a *maison de tolérance* in Paris; she is then arrested and convicted of murder, having killed a man who tried to rape her. The second half of the novel depicts her life of forced labor and total silence in the women's prison where she eventually dies. Reading offers Elisa an escape from both the brothel and the prison, and yet it also seems that it is a problematic reading practice that actually leads to her confinement in both places.

Both *Marthe* and *Elisa* went to publication amid an atmosphere of public outrage over readers, writers, editors and the serial publication of Emile Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* (beginning in April 1876), the so-called *Hernani* of Naturalism. Like Goncourt and Huysmans, the leader of the Médan circle clearly already viewed prostitution as a subject of modern relevance, given that "Nana" Coupeau, the daughter of the failed laundress in *L'Assommoir* was, by the conclusion of the 1876 novel, already supporting herself with her body. In *Nana* (1880), the prostitute turned actress and *courtisane* will ruin an array of men before succumbing to disease just as the Second Empire crumbles. While giving Nana her own novel had been part of Zola's plan for the Rougon-Macquart series since 1852, the debates over the press censorship of *L'Assommoir* and the two *romans de la prostitution* by Huysmans and Goncourt, seemed to precipitate Zola to publish the sequel, in which the prostitute reads "une histoire de fille" and parrots the offended critics.

These three *romans de la prostitution* are thus unified not only by their un-romanticized depictions of "gritty" venal women, their incorporation of working-class slang in conjunction with vocabulary specific to legal and medical discourses, and by their authors' engagement in the Naturalist community (and, thereby in debates over censorship and the place of such depictions

in the novel as a work of modern “high” art). We will return to the latter questions of style and politics later. But first, we will see how—within the narratives of these most unrefined, uneducated of women—Zola, Huysmans and Goncourt all stand witness to the fact that cultural capital (once exclusively the property of the social elite) was no longer preserved from circulating in the world of the popular masses. While on one hand, the authors appear to agree with the censorial bourgeoisie that realist literature, in the wrong hands, *can* have harmful consequences; on the other, they seem to suggest that the “wrong hands” most in need of policing might not be those of literate prostitutes, but those of the ignorant bourgeois consumers.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, literacy rates rose as a result of education reform a generation earlier, and the cost of reading material declined thanks to technological advancements and advertising practices. The effect was a radical shift in the place and the practice of reading in French society.¹⁰ Once an activity only for those educated elite wealthy enough to afford books, which were expensive, under the Restoration reading expanded with education reform and the rise of the *cabinets de lecture*, the rental libraries favored by the petite bourgeoisie. The demand for reading material spread into the urban and rural working classes, although the practice of reading differed from that in the middle classes.

With the continued emphasis on the individual during the Second Empire, distribution changes further facilitated the shift from reading being a collective practice—reading aloud—to a private one: silent reading to the self. This new practice made reading an interaction with an imagined community to which one could belong invisibly, but that also influenced social interactions: “the man who read his newspaper in his salon was taking part in public life, and his activity was perceived accordingly”: it was, in fact, required for participation in high society

¹⁰ See the section “Lonely Leisure and Secret Treasures” for a concise account of the changes in reading as a practice in Alain Corbin, “Backstage” *A History of Private Life, vol. IV: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War* Ed. Philippe Arès and Georges Duby, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer, p. 534-541.

(ibid 536). Clearly, the discourse shaping reading practice was also inseparable from the ongoing gendering and classing of social spheres. It is in light of this that we must also view the attention to the education of bourgeois children: literacy was seen as a path to moral supremacy... or failure. Young ladies, in particular, were considered prone to corruption should they be left alone with the wrong sorts of books. Naturalist authors—it would seem, anyway—tended to agree. The literate prostitutes appear to offer proof of the harm facing young women who are educated in ways unsuitable to a person who is, by nature, unable to discern fact from fiction.

In the opening pages of *Marthe*, the prostitute-turned-actress is being wooed by Léo, a bourgeois journalist and aspiring novelist. The narrative then offers a two-chapter flashback relating the woman's life prior to her appearance on stage. While we eventually have proof that she can read, at first, all we know is that any formal schooling she received was only sufficient to earn her a place in an *atelier* making imitation pearls (12). This, however, suffices to let Huysmans point to a non-standard “education” as first among the commonly cited causes for a woman's turn to prostitution.¹¹ The narrator implies that both nature (a tendency to neurosis and laziness inherited from her parents) and nurture (a fatherless childhood) contributed to Marthe's venality, but that the tipping point was her entry into the tutelage of the other women in the *atelier*. It is there that the fifteen year-old learns that the exchange value of her sexuality is

¹¹ See Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet's account of the reading practice of the very small number of prostitutes who were literate enough before 1836 to spend their leisure time reading. Their practice is described as a passive submission to pleasure: they are “des filles qui s'adonnent à la lecture” (56). Parent critiques this pleasure as neither intellectual or spiritual but sentimental: “on ne sera pas surpris d'apprendre que ces lectures roulent toujours sur des histoires et des romans, particulièrement ceux qui décrivent des scènes tragiques capables d'exciter de vives émotions” (57). What surprises Parent is the morality of their preferred reading materials: “mais ce qui paraîtra peut-être singulier, c'est qu'on n'a jamais rencontré dans leurs mains de ces livres licencieux et obscènes que recherchent les jeunes gens avec tant d'ardeur et qui en corrompent une si grande quantité. Dans l'espace de vingt ans, un médecin de dispensaire n'en a vu qu'une ou deux tenant un de ces livres. Qu'est-ce, en effet, que ces sortes de livres pourraient leur apprendre? la satiété ne rend-elle pas fade et monotone ce qui dans toute autre circonstance est un puissant aiguillon?” He uses their refusal of pornographic works to set up a dichotomy between them and young male readers who, if they are corrupted by such works, were at least corrupted in active pursuit of knowledge, while the prostitute's choice is attributed merely to an avoidance of boredom.

higher than that of her labor; or rather, as the narrator puts it, it is there that accounts of her fellow *ouvrières*' romantic exploits awaken in Marthe the latent desire for her own:

Une fille est perdue dès qu'elle voit d'autre filles : les conversations des collégiens au lycée ne sont rien près de celles des ouvrières ; l'atelier, c'est la pierre de touche des vertus, l'or y est rare, le cuivre abondant. Une fillette ne choppe pas, comme le disent les romanciers, par amour, par entraînement des sens, mais beaucoup par orgueil et un peu par curiosité. Marthe écoutait les exploits de ses amies, leurs doux et meurtriers combats, l'œil agrandi, la bouche brûlée de fièvre. (*JM* 13)

In the *atelier*, Marthe is exposed to language that transgresses gender norms (*collégiens* are expected, if not allowed, to discuss sex). The stories she hears are contrasted with the literary tradition of the *courtisane* redeemed by love. For those predisposed, the text implies, exposure to realist narratives can transform the harmless schoolboy's scopophilic desire for knowledge, wide-eyed *curiosité*, into a desire to consume—literally, sexually and commercially—as suggested by Marthe's burning lips.

Goncourt's novel similarly blames his protagonist's turn to prostitution on a gender-transgressing form of education.¹² As the sickly daughter of a midwife, the young Elisa had overheard too much about sex too soon: "La révélation des mystères et des hontes du commerce de l'homme et de la femme de Paris vint la trouver dans sa couchette, presque dans son berceau" (*JM* 67). As with the narratives that Marthe heard in the *atelier*, this illicit knowledge is framed in terms of literature, the influence of which on an unformed, unguided mind can only be

¹² Indeed, Marthe's early exposure to the medical reality of sex (which I consider here) is combined with a history of childhood illness predisposing her to neurosis and a fatherless childhood—as in Huysman's novel—and a criminal mother (she subsidizes her meager income as a midwife by providing abortions). Furthermore, this problematic education—the product of a woman in the labor-force (as is, by the way, Marthe's exposure to similar accounts of sexuality in the *atelier*)—will not be erased by the three years of gender-normative religious schooling that Elisa receives later "chez les dames de Saint-Ouen" (71).

harmful: “l’enfant à la pensée inoccupée, rêvassante, assista aux aventures du déshonneur, aux drames des liaisons cachées, aux histoires des passions hors nature” (68). The bigger problem, for Goncourt’s narrator, is not only that Elisa was exposed to them. It is that these *aventures*, *drames* and *histoires* reveal truths about sex that belong to masculine-dominated discourses. Her “ignorance”—the narrator’s term for the socially acceptable narratives that restrict young girls’ knowledge of sex to the naive belief in “le nouveau-né trouvé sous le buisson de roses” (67)—was replaced with a blend of pornography and medicine: “d’erotiques détails, des matérialités de la procréation” (68).

As a result of her exposure to these stories—simultaneously too realistic and too *romanesque*—once Elisa reaches an appropriate age to formally study midwifery, she resists the medical books that she would have to absorb, finding the life they lead lacking in entertainment value: “La fille [...] disait qu’elle n’avait pas la *caboché* faite pour y faire entrer des livres embêtants. Elle ne trouvait pas non plus *rigolo* de voir, à tout moment, comme ça, des oreillers retournés par les doigts crispés de l’Éclampsie” (71). For Goncourt’s narrator, and for Huysmans’ as well, there is a certain reading practice which is inextricably linked to the prostitute’s education that fails to produce a stable distinction between reality and narrative.

This early formation, in which reality and representation are conflated, shapes how the women approach art and literature later in the novels. After the summary of Marthe’s initial experience as a prostitute, Huysmans’ narrator returns to the present to tell the story of the *collage* between the writer and the actress. When Marthe enters the apartment of the middle-class bachelor for the first time, she is met by his sizable collection of framed prints. She is drawn to the images—literally, physically—approaching the closest one with an outstretched finger, in a way that recalls her embodied manner of listening to the *ouvrières* conversations

about their men. The scene that attracts her attention is a representation that she sees only as a picture of “ces gens qui boivent” (21): the narrator tells us it is a copy of “Le roi des fèves,” by seventeenth-century Flemish master, Jacob Jordaens.¹³ True to bourgeois expectations of members of the working class, Marthe’s “reading” of the print is limited to her identification of the subject.¹⁴ Her affective reaction to the image is equally indicative of her lower class status. Marthe laughs, “à gorge déployée,” at the carnivalesque image; then, as if she were in the audience at a popular entertainment, “elle se divertit à contempler cette tablée de joyeux drilles” (22).

Books play a similar role as a distraction in Goncourt’s *Elisa*: restless in her life in the country brothel, the woman who had refused to read medical books turns, now, to the novels she finds in the bedroom of the madam’s sickly son: “au milieu de la disposition chagrine de son esprit [...] elle cherchait une distraction dans la lecture des livres, des romans qui traînaient sur le lit du jeune homme, et qu’il lisait comme un malade, en allant de l’un à l’autre” (83). If the son, in his illness, reminds us of Elisa as child, it is implied that Elisa, in turn, resembles him in his unhealthy, unfocused reading practice. Indeed, what unites Marthe’s raucous laugh and Elisa’s silent reading is the infantilization of women and the working class that the two women’s responses effect. Immediately following the above depiction of Elisa is a short chapter devoted to commenting on the child-like gullibility of the working-class woman: “Chez la femme du peuple, qui sait tout juste lire, la lecture produit le même ravissement que chez l’enfant”; like a

¹³ This is the title used in several nineteenth-century accounts of one of several versions of the scene, including published reviews of the Belvédère gallery in Vienna: the painting is also known as “Le Roi boit,” and is a representation of a traditional Flemish proverb. At least one of the versions was housed at the Louvre at the time. We will return to the details of the painting itself later.

¹⁴ For a thoughtful consideration of the general ideas about the working class and the Louvre that informed the opinions of all three Naturalist writers discussed here, see Robert Lethbridge, “A Visit to the Louvre: *L’Assommoir* Revisited,” *The Modern Language Review* 87:1 (Jan., 1992), pp. 41-55.

child, says the narrator, the barely-literate masses cannot separate fiction from reality, art from entertainment. What is more, they tend to mistake the characters for themselves.

In fact, what seems most disturbing to the prostitute's companion is the woman's loss of self in her quest for distraction. Huysmans' narrator says of Marthe that the chaos of the festive scene evoked a fleeting memory of her own past: "Elle eut comme une rapide vision des gogailles passées" (ibid). She briefly reflects, then moves on to another print: an engraving of "un des épisodes de la vie des courtisanes," by William Hogarth, a well-known English painter of the same era. This one too provokes "des souvenirs précis," however this time the image strikes her as such an accurate depiction of her former life that she momentarily loses her ability to speak for herself: "elle demeura, fascinée, muette, et comme sortant d'un songe, dit entre ses dents, 'Comme c'est bien cela!'" (ibid). It is as if her own painful subjectivity disappears the moment she recognizes the subject of Hogarth's totalizing representation as her own life.

Similarly, in the chapter on reading in *Elisa*, Goncourt's narrator says that *la femme du peuple* is all the more childlike for this identification:

[elle a] la foi de l'enfant qui ne peut lire un livre sans se donner à lui et vivre en lui [...]

Ainsi de la confusion et de la mêlée de ses sensations irréfléchies avec les choses qu'elle lit, la femme du peuple est impérieusement, involontairement amenée à substituer à sa personne le personnage imaginaire du roman, à se dépouiller de sa misérable et prosaïque individualité, à entrer forcément dans la peau poétique et romanesque de l'héroïne : une véritable incarnation qui se continue et se prolonge longtemps après le livre fermé. (84)

What is interesting about this is that, for Elisa, giving herself to another, and stripping down her own individuality to inhabit a body that incarnates someone else's fiction, is a literal practice that directly equates her reading practice with her profession. This makes all the more sense—and

will later inform both her crime and her reaction to her punishment—in light of the fact that her education had consisted of “reading” materials that led her to transgress the limits of gender norms, the result of which was an attempt to preserve her subjectivity by remaining silent. In her flight from the self via the novel, the working-class woman seeks (albeit illegitimately) to appropriate the bourgeois practice of silent reading.

La Fille Elisa opens with a prologue depicting the sentencing of the prostitute to death; the novel is then divided into two parts: Elisa’s life as a prostitute before her arrest, and her life in a woman’s prison after it. However, the account of the crime itself is included in the second part, after Elisa is sentenced to a life of perpetual silence. This is significant. Goncourt’s novel is entirely about cause and effect. While he claims, in the preface, to seek to understand Éliisa’s insanity as a result of the oppressive prison system, as Barbara Giraud has argued, he effectively anchors her neurosis as a preexisting condition resulting from her childhood.¹⁵ However, Giraud does not show that this childhood, the root of her conflation of life and literature that led to her life as a prostitute, constituted the formation of the reading practice that led to the crime of passion, which led to her imprisonment, which led to her insanity.

In her prison cell, Elisa keeps a letter her lover had written her before their outing. Reading it triggers her memory of the day. The circumstances in which a prostitute became a murderer thus are communicated to the reader by a strange composite of the woman’s memory, told by a third-person omniscient narrator (up to a point, at which the actual crime itself is related by what looks to be a transcribed conversation between the narrator and an unnamed witness). However, it could be argued that, in fact, two problematic acts of reading were the cause of the crime.

¹⁵ “Entre prostitution et silence, la fleur empoisonnée de la modernité: *La Fille Elisa* (1877) d’Edmond de Goncourt,” *Women in French Studies* 18 (2010): p. 55-68.

As the grammatical errors in his letter indicate, the education that Elisa's lover, a country-born soldier, had received was not extensive. His desire is nonetheless mediated by his reading, even though this was limited to works of piety, which was not usual¹⁶: [Il] était sans lettres, n'avait jamais lu que des almanachs et deux ou trois petits livres d'un illuminisme tendre à la glorification de la vierge Marie. Lorsque l'homme avait apparu dans le jeune homme, une part de cette religiosité s'était tournée vers la femme. Et ses amours d'abord chastes [...] avaient brûlé en lui [...]” (126). The opposition between the virgin and the whore is a commonplace; the soldier, however, does not appear to confuse the two types of women, even when using the language about one to connote the other. “Parlant à une femme, parlant à Elisa [...] la parole de cet homme était une sorte d'invocation, une effusion presque priante et délirante, un parler d'amour où des mots revenant des trois livres amoureuxment pieux qu'il avait lus, en faisaient une langue de dévotion” (ibid). As the phrase “l'homme avait apparu dans le jeune homme” suggests, the soldier was using the only poetic language he knew, the language of religious devotion, to communicate his carnal desire.

Elisa, however, seems unable to understand such language figuratively. She is thus thoroughly shocked by his sudden, seemingly unannounced, advances: “Soudain, sans une parole, sans un mot, elle sentait sur elle les violences et la brutalité d'un viol” (127). Her reaction, to fend him off with the knife she was carrying, only provokes laughter from him: “elle voyait devant elle le visage de son amant qui avait sur la figure un rire bête et tout drôle” (128). She presumably stabs him out of anger. The reader learns that Elisa did not mention this to her lawyer because no one would have believed that a prostitute would have refused a man's advances.

¹⁶ Corbin, “The Secret of the Individual,” op. cit., p. 539.

However, at this point, we must recall the letter from Elisa's lover, in which he had written "Rien au monde ne peut faire oublier tes caresse [sic] et tes baisers brulan [sic]. *La mort* seule me les ferai [sic] oublier" (123). If Huysman's Marthe is indeed defined by her inability to distinguish between literature and life, between the figurative and the literal—as we have been led to believe—then the attention that the narrator of *La Fille Elisa* brings to Elisa's reading of the word "mort" seems to ask us to reconsider the crime for which this latter prostitute had been imprisoned. It is during their walk through an old cemetery in which the soldier makes his move on the prostitute. She had refused up to that point in order to keep the public circulation of her body separate from the ideal love she imagines.¹⁷ When it becomes clear that this distinction is threatened, she turns her lover's words against him, making his figurative speech circulate as pure, and violent, fact. Her murderous reaction thus serves to silence not only her lover's laughter, but also his improper use of language. She even rips up his letter after a while (128). In short, she seeks to destroy that which threatens her ideal separation of the pure and the public. This, Goncourt implies, is an act of insanity. Especially given that, in every other instance of contact with language, Elisa placed little value on such a distinction.

A few pages earlier, the narrator describes the prisoner's ritualistic reading of a page of the *faits-divers* section of a newspaper she found: "elle le regardait pendant son travail, en lisait de temps en temps quelques lignes avec les yeux que l'on voit à une dévote dans un livre de piété" (121). However, she reduces her actual prayer book to merely a supply of type with which she composes her own news-paper: she pieces together cut-out letters and glues them to an empty box, which allows her to correspond with a woman in her old brothel. The equivalency of

¹⁷ "Car chez cette femme, ayant, par moments, le vomissement de l'amour physique, c'était un insupportable supplice de se livrer 'au petit homme chéri' ainsi qu'aux passants auxquels elle se vendait, de lui apporter dans l'acte charnel les restes de tous, de le salir enfin, comme disait cette autre, de la publicité de son contact. [...] Et continuellement dans sa tête, dans l'élancement pur d'un rêve chaste, forgeaient, entre elle et le *lignard* aux fleurs, des amours avec des tendresses ignorantes..." (78).

the sacred and the profane, the commercial and the mundane appears to be synonymous with a practice that reduces reading to a form of distraction, or rather, a means of fleeing the truth about one's self.

In Huysmans' novel, the episode of the prostitute inspecting her future lover's engravings similarly takes on the relationship between the "who" and the "how" of reading. Huysmans equally juxtaposes the democratization of the subject of a work of art and that of its audience, and maps it on to the trope of prostitution, which was already firmly associated with anxieties related to social mobility. Both the Jordaens and the Hogarth depict figures of the lower class in scenes that communicate social disorder. Yet the audience for such works had been—up until the nineteenth-century revolution in print technology—primarily, if not exclusively, members of the wealthy elite.

Paintings, like books, had circulated in the same limited circle as signs of both cultural and financial capital: representations, even satirical ones, reproduced the existing social order. However, after the revolutions, advancements in lithography—including chromolithography—had two inextricably linked effects: the aestheticization of advertisement, which helped reduce the cost of newspapers and thereby dramatically increased distribution; and the commercialization of art, with the production and sale of affordable prints of works by the great masters as souvenirs or decorative objects. That Huysmans' Léo—a mediocre journalist—could afford to furnish his apartment with copies of Jordaens and Hogarth attests to both the demand for reproductions of famous works, as a growing portion of the population was exposed to art reviews in the newspaper, and the availability of such reproductions at a low cost. The perceived

loss of a work's uniqueness—or a decline in craftsmanship required to produce it—effectively reduces its cultural value.¹⁸

The most troubling figure in the art-filled room thus seems—at first, anyway—to be Marthe, not Léo (even though he is arguably the more logical representative of the demand side of the market in cheap reproductions of original artwork). This is because her consumption of art reproduces only the use-value of the subject: the people drinking, and the brothel evoke only her own past experiences. The identification that the presumably reformed prostitute makes between her private life and the subjects of the carnivalesque paintings takes the debasement of commodified cultural capital one step further. While Léo displays a certain familiarity with art in his appreciation of his companion's beauty¹⁹, Marthe's appreciation of the paintings reveals a total blindness to their artistry: “ni ces opulences, ni ces fougues, ni ces débauches de chairs à la Rubens, ni ces pourpris de lys et de vermillon, ni cette plénitude, ni cette somptuosité de charnure, ni ces remous, ni ces vagues de carmin et de nacre ne la tinrent longtemps. Elle regarda, sans s'y arrêter, différents tableaux...” (22). Focused on seeking familiar subjects in art, and seeing art only as a source of entertainment, she sees neither the stylistic elements nor the social commentary that had, in the past, contributed to making the works of art iconic enough to merit mass reproduction.

Huysmans' narrator seems, hereby, to suggest that a certain uneducated (or miseducated) approach to reading can in fact have a deleterious effect on members of the working class. It is not Marthe's lack of objective art appreciation that is most troubling in the novel: it is the unconscious response that takes its place. The scene of the actress in front of the farcical images

¹⁸ This is according to the old rules of what Rancière calls the “representational regime,” in which the value of art could be sufficiently guaranteed by the skill of the artist.

¹⁹ Léo compares Marthe to a painting of Rembrandt's wife (21), a point to which we will return later.

seems to imply that it is actually dangerous to combine art that can circulate freely as entertainment with readers who might perceive it not as entertainment but as a literal representation of—or worse, an advertisement for—social disorder. After seeing the Hogarth, Marthe sits down, pensively, as memories of her past life in a brothel come flooding back. “Elle songeait à sa vie d’autrefois. Tous ses souvenirs se réveillaient. Ces allures de bouge, cette saveur de fille qu’elle s’étudiait à faire disparaître, reparurent tout à coup et l’obsédèrent invinciblement. Plus elle s’observait et plus les mots étranges, plus les maladresses, plus les expressions qu’elle eût voulu oublier lui revenaient et jaillissaient malgré elle de ses lèvres.” (22) It is as if seeing her own life depicted in a work of art makes her lose control of her body and speech.

Her temporary escape from the practice of prostitution is seen as yet another failed performance, once the work of art brings out her “true” identity as a prostitute. Later, when she and Léo run out of money, Marthe sees no option but to commit suicide or return to prostitution. Her former lover, the actor Ginginet, explains her choice of the latter to Léo: “elle renonce à tromper les hommes. Marthe ne mentira pas, maintenant qu’elle n’aura plus l’occasion de simuler les geigneries du parfait amour : ce que les bourgeois appelleraient piquer une tête dans le cloaque, descendre le dernier échelon de l’infamie, je l’appelle, moi, une expiation, un retour à l’honnêteté !” (34) Prostitution, thus, was not a practice, but an expression of Marthe’s nature. And art was able to expose this long before Léo could see it.

Proposing that art can expose social betterment as a role, the performance of which is no less deceptive than the work done by an actress or prostitute, puts an uncomfortable spin on Bourdieu’s claim that aesthetic taste reveals one’s “true” class. Yet this is what Huysmans does in making artistic representations of her former life the trigger for Marthe’s return to prostitution.

In spite of her conscious efforts to forget her former non-standard speech—be it vulgar or in a rural dialect—and to appropriate standard, middle class language and affects, when Marthe confronts a work of art depicting a “popular” subject, it literally reflects her: it causes her to reveal, to expose, her true (popular) class identity.

Marthe thus embodies here the Bourgeoisie’s worst nightmare in two ways. First, she offers evidence that, should popular subjects be allowed to appear in realist art, they will one day see themselves and cease to perform as the docile, subjected bodies on which the capitalist hierarchy depends. The “mots étranges,” the foreign/outside/strange language, that surge forth, as a result of contact with art, function as a freudian trace of what the bourgeois value system would repress: the uneducated, underpaid working class women (on which their profitable enterprises depend). Second, and perhaps more disconcertingly, if her reaction to art exposes her proper class identity, art—which, in the prior representational regime, faithfully reproduced the social hierarchy—seems, itself, out of control, and puts the viewer at risk of revealing the illegitimacy of any claim to a better position in the new, terrifyingly democratic society.

At the conclusion of the novel, a letter from Léo announces his renunciation of brothels and his marriage to a boring but stable bourgeois woman. In it, Marthe is finally reduced to an element in a work of art, one which reveals the “honnêteté” of the proper bourgeois woman: “quant à Marthe [...], je lui pardonne toutes ses vilenies, toutes ses traîtrises ; les filles comme elle ont cela de bon qu’elles font aimer celles qui ne leur ressemblent pas ; elles servent de repoussoir à l’honnêteté” (56). Léo, the connoisseur of Rubens and Jordaens, would have known that a *repoussoir* is an art term frequently used to describe seventeenth-century Dutch painting: it is a figure that serves to draw the viewer’s eye to the main subject of the painting. If the *fille* in Huysmans *histoire d’une fille* is honest—that is, if her story tells the truth about something—and

yet her role in Huysmans' work of art (as in Léo's life) is to point to the main subject, what is that subject? Not the nameless proper bourgeois woman Léo is marrying, but the failed bourgeois writer himself.

The Hogarth image itself also functions as a point of entry into the irony of the work as a whole. Some of Huysman's readers seem to have missed the author's sarcasm undermining the prostitute's condemnation and the final return to order, citing Léo's letter as proof of its moralizing function.²⁰ However, those familiar with Huysmans' other works agree that the author finds a young bourgeois poet-*manqué* in search of complacent domesticity much more of a social ill than the prostitute. Given Huysmans' careful attention to detail in his art criticism, it is worth noting a useful, if perhaps unintentional, slippage, between the title of the Hogarth engraving and the image described. The work referred to in the ekphrasis as "*une gravure d'Hogarth, un des épisodes de la vie des courtisanes*"²¹ would seem to belong to the 18th century English artist William Hogarth's series *A Harlot's Progress*. These moralizing, yet satirical depictions of vice enjoyed a wide circulation, and would be familiar to both author and reader. The plot of Hogarth's series closely resembles the clichéd path to prostitution I described earlier. The central figure in each scene is the heroine, and the series' moralizing "lesson" is about the pernicious effect such women have on "honest" society.

However, the image described in *Marthe* actually belongs to a different Hogarth series, equally if not more well known, with a different central character under scrutiny: *A Rake's Progress*. The later series of engravings shows the young, bourgeois gentleman in each scene, squandering his inheritance on gambling and women before having to marry an ugly, old widow

²⁰ See, for example, Robert Ziegler, "Feminized Reality / Male Realism: The Case of Huysman's *Marthe*," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 31.2 (1994): 188-199,

²¹ *Marthe* 22

to pay his debts, finally ending his days in the madhouse. The ekphrasis in *Marthe* is easily identifiable as the third image in this series in which the hero enjoys an evening at a brothel. While the women are the most visible part of this scene, and the subject of Marthe's reading, the recipient of Hogarth's moralizing gaze is the young man in the corner, hidden under the skirts of the woman on his lap.

As a disappointed Ernest Raynaud pointed out in 1890, *Marthe* isn't really about the *fille*, but rather the couple Marthe and Léo, and sometimes, just Léo. Marthe disappears for entire chapters at a time. Similarly to the embedded Hogarth, the novel's title creates the expectation of another reproduction of the clichéd prostitute, which the representation noticeably fails at times to fulfill. The subject of the novel's criticism shifts from Marthe to Léo, from the subject of dominant bourgeois anxiety to the representative of the dominant bourgeoisie itself. In renouncing desire and art, *filles de joie* and his search for modern beauty, in favor of a banal tranquil hearth,²² is Léo's end equivalent to the payment of a debt or death in a madhouse?

In essence, Marthe's role as both a reader and a subject to be read conflates what Bourdieu describes as a working-class view of art—a literal interpretation that focuses on the material reality of the subject—with the bourgeois anxiety about reading women: that exposure to representations can have as corrupting an influence as contact with the reality they represent. The effect, on Huysmans' reader, is that Marthe's ignorance in the face of art feminizes and infantilizes the working-class practice of reading visual representations and confirms the dominated status of the woman reader. However, art also exposes one more trait that neither class nor sex alone can account for... the characteristic inherent to the prostitute that education

²² “Je n'ajouterai pas à ta stupeur en te faisant l'éloge de ma femme: ne crains rien, je ne te dirai point qu'elle est belle, qu'elle a les jeux de saphir ou de jayet, et que ses lèvres sont cinabrine, non; elle n'est même pas jolie, mais que m'importe ? Ce sera terre à terre que de la regarder, le soir, ravauder mes chaussettes et que de me faire assourdir par les cris de mes galopins, d'accord; mais comme, malgré toute nos théories, nous n'avons pu trouver mieux, je me contenterai de cette vie, si banale qu'elle te puisse sembler.” *Marthe* 56

and reading only brings out: the endless quest for entertainment, an insatiable desire to consume. And because of this, Huysman's depiction of Marthe's aesthetic ignorance brings bourgeois superiority crashing down around her.

The prostitute not only confuses reality and representation; she sees both as means to satisfy her desire for what Rancière calls, in his essay on *Madame Bovary*, the "excitement" that the bourgeoisie themselves sought in every interaction with commodities, of which art and literature had become simply another example.²³ Having seen, up to this point, how these two authors' depictions of the literate prostitute reproduced the critical position on female readership from within the bourgeois value system, only to map it back on the bourgeois men who would dismiss their work, I will now, briefly, turn to Zola's *Nana* in order to demonstrate this with yet one more example of a prostitute's reading practice that more explicitly mirrors that of the bourgeois critics who fail to recognize realist literature as art.

Huysmans had only recently discovered the early volumes of the *Rougon-Macquart* series when he met Zola in the winter following the publication of *Marthe*.²⁴ And yet a reader cannot help but find, in Marthe's vapid consumption of Léo's prints, an echo of the scene in *L'Assommoir* in which the wedding party, chased indoors by the rain, kills time before dinner by

²³ In his essay, "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed," Rancière gives a powerful summary of the affect born of the desire for democracy that originated in the bourgeoisie, but was spreading to the working classes: "the big concern of the 1850s and 1860s [...] was encapsulated in one word: *excitement*. At that time in France, the diagnosis could be heard everywhere at every time; society suffered from a fatal disease that affected the social order and individual behaviors as well. It had become an unrelenting turmoil of thoughts and desires, appetites and frustrations. In the good old times of monarchy, religion and aristocracy, there had been a clear, long-standing hierarchy [...]. Unfortunately that order had been shattered, first by the French Revolution, second by the rise of industrialism, third by the new media—the newspapers, lithographs and so on, which made words and images, dreams and aspirations, available everywhere to anybody. Society had become a hustle and bustle of free and equal individuals that were dragged together into a ceaseless whirl in search of an excitement that was nothing more than the internalization of the endless and purposeless agitation of the whole social body. Such was the discourse of the notables and the learned persons. What must draw our attention is the synonymy they gave for that excitement. That synonym was *democracy*" (235).

²⁴ Ruth B. Antosh claims that he had only read the early novels by the winter of 1876 in *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J.-K. Huysmans*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986. p. 13. However, it is entirely possible that he had read, at the very least, the first six chapters of *L'Assommoir* as they appeared in *Le Bien Public*.

walking through the Louvre.²⁵ The working-class museum-goers appreciate the hardwood floor more than the paintings, and one member of the party thinks La Jaconde looks like his aunt. Unlike Marthe, who judges the Hogarth positively as an accurate reflection of her lived experience, Gervaise criticizes the museum (and/or the artist) because she could not recognize her own situation in the subject of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*. The two are similar in that their appreciation of a work of art is based on the extent to which it reflects their limited, first-hand, experiential knowledge of their social reality. Not only do they both lack a command of cultural capital necessary to interpret what they see, but their understanding of "art" does not include the premise that a depiction of a specific subject can represent a universal (or at least more general) truth.

Nana, the product of the working-class wedding, similarly embodies the same view of art. Her literacy may not appear significant at first. Zola makes it clear that Nana's writing skills are rudimentary.²⁶ But identifying this view with a prostitute, rather than a laundress, more strongly communicates Zola's position on such a view. We learn that Nana is literate, but not a proficient enough writer to pen her own letters to her son. This reflects a certain social reality vis-à-vis education in working-class Paris. However, Zola then metaphorizes her literacy. As a reader, Nana resembles her working-class mother in her inability to recognize herself in a figurative

²⁵ Huysmans was also, admittedly, indebted to the Goncourts, in whose novel *Germinie Lacerteux* there appears an uncannily similar scene. Either way, for a thoughtful consideration of the general ideas about the working class and the Louvre that informed all three Naturalist writers' opinions, see Robert Lethbridge, "A Visit to the Louvre: *L'Assommoir* Revisited," *The Modern Language Review* 87:1 (Jan., 1992), pp. 41-55.

²⁶ We learn early on in the novel that, while Nana has in her possession the material effects of a literate *bourgeoise*—"du **eau** papier," "encrier et une bouteille d'encre de trois sous,"—she lacks the education to put it **tu** use. Instead, she asks her older Parisian friend, Mme Maloir, to write a letter to Dagueuet for her. The indirect discourse suggests that her distaste serves to partly mask her inability: "Ça l'ennuyait d'écrire, puis elle n'était pas sûre de son orthographe, tandis que sa vieille amie tournait des lettres pleines de coeur" (54).

representation, even when that representation—Fauchery’s article “La Mouche d’or”—is not a depiction of her situation, but, in fact, a textual portrait of her: “”

This inability to see the whole in the sum of the parts is common to Goncourt and Huysmans’ prostitutes as well. For Elisa, who at one point tries to decipher the writing on the packets of possessions belonging to the prisoners, “la vue des objets était comme diffuse, ne lui apportait rien de leur ensemble, de leur aspect général, et cependant d’infiniment petits détails entraient et se gravaient dans sa tête presque malgré elle” (115). Lost in her attempt to read, she becomes, herself, the surface on which details are engraved. Similarly, Marthe, while waiting for her first client, catches an alienating glimpse of her body framed in a mirror, and fails to recognize herself: “sa vue se rassérénait et elle se voyait, dans une grande glace à cadre de verre, prostrée impudemment sur une banquette, coiffée comme pour aller au bal, les chairs relevées de dentelles pimentées d’odeurs fortes. Elle ne pouvait croire que cette image fût la sienne” (17). The image she sees is then described as a frozen composite of parts, adorned with the various effects of femininity: “Elle regardait avec étonnement ses bras poudrés de perline, ses sourcils charbonnés, ses lèvres rouges comme des viandes saignantes, ses jambes revêtues de bas de soie cerise, sa poitrine ramassée et peureuse, tout l’appât troublant de ses chairs qui frissonnaient sous les fanfioles du peignoir” (17). Syntactically, the women’s body parts are acted upon—at times violently—by commodities that, like the packets surrounding Elisa, leave an incoherent, illegible trace on Marthe’s body. This seems to suggest that a practice of reading that would make texts and commodities indistinguishable from each other is necessarily going to fail to provide the reader with any significant meaning.

The narrator insists that reading—like the museum visit—is merely a way for Nana to spend unstructured time, a leisure activity: “le moment le plus dur, c’étaient les deux ou trois

heures entre le déjeuner et la toilette. D'ordinaire elle proposait un bésigue à sa vieille amie ; parfois, elle lisait *Le Figaro*, où les échos des théâtres et les nouvelles du monde l'intéressaient ; même il lui arrivait d'ouvrir un livre, car elle se piquait de littérature" (325). Nana's reading practice, like Elisa's, destroys the division between art and non-art. Not only does it collapse theatre reviews with society gossip, put journalism on par with books, and conflate all books with "literature," it also makes the use value of all these various texts equivalent to that of a card game. To a certain extent, this fits with the stereotype of the venal woman as the embodiment of the disintegration of social hierarchy: if Nana—like La Torpille, her balzacian predecessor—ruins men at all levels of society, and is, herself, metonymical with the collapse of the Empire, it only makes sense that she have a similar flattening effect on the hierarchy of products within the publishing industry. Indeed, the prostitute's stereotypical excessive physicality is reflected in her view of reading as a distraction: satisfying her desire for literature can fill the time between feeding her body and adorning it.

However, it is precisely in this excessive desire to consume—to enjoy, ingest, and discard—literature that Nana is not reflective of a working-class reading practice, but rather a bourgeois one. A few pages later, Nana follows the model of the bourgeois members of society, bringing the fruit of her solitary reading practice into collective discussion: "Elle avait lu dans la journée un roman qui faisait grand bruit, l'histoire d'une fille ; et elle se révoltait, elle disait que tout cela était faux, témoignant d'ailleurs une répugnance indignée contre cette littérature immonde dont la prétension était de rendre la nature" (337). In an article about the auto-representationality of the nineteenth-century novel, Franc Wagner points out that attributing these stock criticisms of Naturalist novels to a character so unperceptive that she fails to recognize herself in a journalist's portrait serves a paraliterary function: to disarm Zola's critics.

I wish to add that it is not only particular literary critics that Zola seeks to undermine in this scene of meta-reading: it is also the class-based superiority of the values system to which they adhere.

Nana is set in 1870. If the scientifically-minded Zola makes an anachronistic reference to either Huysmans' *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* or Goncourt's *La Fille Elisa*, both of which Zola had recently read and publicly supported, it is safe to presume it was for a reason. The reference to the unnamed "histoire d'une fille" allows us to consider Nana's reaction in the context of the debates over censorship and the role of literature in the new Republic. Her opinions—both her offense at the "histoire de fille" and her taste for literature as entertainment—reproduce the role of literature from the perspective of the censorial bourgeoisie: "elle voulait des oeuvres tendres et nobles, des choses pour la faire rêver et lui grandir l'âme" (ibid).

This is not just because reading—and holding opinions on literature—has a performative function for the character: she is playing the role of dinner party hostess, which is to say, proper bourgeois woman. Only moments before, Nana and her friend had been recounting tales of their shared past as registered brothel residents: unmediated by the literary frame, the subject proved entirely unsuitable to the uneasy bourgeois male audience. On one hand, the opinion she offers later on the book she had read, "que tout cela était faux," reproduces the working-class value system (the value of a representation depends on the accuracy with which it communicates the use value of the subject). On the other, the performance of dismissing the work on account of its subject conflates bourgeois and working-class value systems.

The character's ignorance also functions as a critical reflection of the source of those opinions: when the uneducated actress dismisses the novel she had nonetheless read as "cette littérature immonde," her crimes against literature are less offensive than those of the authentic

bourgeois women (and men) whom Nana is merely imitating. Zola's point in comparing the prostitute and the bourgeois critic is, like Baudelaire's, that, while the working class might not understand art, at least they are not trying to control it.

Given the government's anxiety over a perceived loss of control of a novel's circulation—due to expansion in the print industry, and the dramatic increase in serialized *feuilletons*, many of which were targeted at female readers—national censors took it upon themselves to impose pre-Revolution rules of *bienséance* on the genre itself.²⁷ The goal in penalizing authors for crimes against morality (*outrage aux mœurs*) was purportedly to avoid the destabilization of society that could result from the distribution of incendiary (revolutionary) literature to an ever-widening (and increasingly democratic, that is, proletariat) population of readers. State censorship offered the dominant bourgeoisie a means to identify and diffuse threats to gender and class norms (as well as political authority). To authors, however, censorship represented a threat to their privileged status as artists... that is to say, as men whose exceptional citizenship was protected by publicly recognizable genius, which positioned them above the *vulgus* and beyond the reach of the laws governing it.

Under the Second Empire, press coverage transformed censorship trials into public arenas for debates over the definition of literature and its role in modern society. Not only were new works such as Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* brought before the tribunal, but even previously published titles like Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* stood accused of offending public morals. All subsequent “literary” works would necessarily be mediated by the discourse of censorship. However, as I said earlier, the political rhetoric of this

²⁷ I am drawing here upon the classical distinction between the content viewed as befitting novels and the accounts of everyday life allowed in news reports: Elizabeth Ladenson establishes this distinction, and its gendering, as central to the mentality in which the trial of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Mme Bovary* took place in chapter one of *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007.

discourse confirmed the conflict between the realist author and the bourgeois social order. Thus, for the new generation of authors under the Third Republic, mediating their definitions of literature through the discourse of censorship was, in fact, potentially productive for two reasons.

First, given that, two decades after they were called artless and offensive, Baudelaire and Flaubert were securely incorporated into the literary canon, Naturalist authors were able to appropriate censorship as a cultural code that traced bourgeois offense back onto a novel as a sign of literary merit. Second, because both novelists and prostitutes were accused of crimes against morality²⁸, novels about prostitutes simultaneously invited bourgeois censorship and flouted the author's own tolerance for prostitutes in art. Thus, using censorship as a code for literature offered some authors of *romans de la prostitution* the possibility of recovering the distinction between a small group of men recognizable by their uncompromised artistic integrity and the undistinguished masses of dominant order whose bourgeois morality could be easily threatened by both ignorant public women and intelligent men of letters. Let us now turn to two authors whose experiences of publishing their novels about prostitutes demonstrate how these effects play out.

²⁸ While the two crimes are covered under two different articles, which appear in two different books of the 1810 Penal Code, both are crimes against common decency, against "les mœurs" of an individual or the public at large. The crimes of the pimp and the pornographer were thus collapsed in the literary imagination (if not the popular one as well) during the 1857 trials of Gustave Flaubert and Charles Baudelaire whose works were brought to trial on the basis that "literature can be a corrupting influence [and] that the prime target of corruption is girls" in particular, but all women were susceptible (Ladenson, op. cit. 59).

Livre III, Titre premier (Crimes et délits contre la chose publique), Chapitre III (Crimes et délits contre la paix publique), section IV (Délits commis par la voie d'écrits, images ou gravures, distribués sans noms d'auteurs, imprimeur ou graveur), article 287: "Toute exposition ou distribution de chansons, pamphlets, figures ou *images contraires aux bonnes mœurs*, sera punie d'une amende de seize francs à cinq cents francs, d'un emprisonnement d'un mois à un an, et de la confiscation des planches et des exemplaires imprimés ou gravés, de chansons, figures ou autres objets du délit."

Livre III, Titre second (Crimes et délits contre les particuliers), Chapitre premier (Crimes et délits contre les personnes), section IV (Attentats aux mœurs), article 334: "Quiconque aura *attenté aux mœurs*, en excitant, favorisant ou facilitant habituellement la débauche ou la corruption de la jeunesse de l'un ou de l'autre sexe au-dessous de l'âge de vingt-un ans, sera puni d'un emprisonnement de six mois à deux ans, et d'une amende de cinquante francs à cinq cents francs."

Public censorship and self-promotion

The year was 1876 and twenty-eight year-old Georges-Marie Huysmans was looking to make a name for himself as an author. Though employed as a civil servant, he had had a brief career as a journalist and was a self-published poet whose sole volume had appeared two years earlier under the pen name of Joris-Karl. He had just spent several weeks in Belgium, overseeing the publication of his first novel, also *à compte d'auteur*. It was possible to have his book produced in Brussels, he wrote in a letter, “a moitié prix de Paris,”²⁹ due to the lack of regulation of the publication industry in the bordering country. His novel, *Marthe*, was loosely based on his own brief liaison with an actress at Les Folies Bobino in Paris.³⁰ Huysmans was purportedly inspired by his appreciation for *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865), co-authored by Edmond and his younger brother, Jules. Huysmans would say as much in the letter accompanying the copy of his book that he sent to the older Goncourt on October 1, 1876. (This homage was unsurprising: Emile Zola, too, would later call this novel a foundational moment in the history of Naturalism: “*Germinie Lacerteux* est une date. Le livre fait entrer le peuple dans le roman.”³¹)

Indeed, Huysmans’ first (unpublished) attempt at a novel had focused on an *ouvrière* during the siege of Paris; however, he had abandoned it in order to take up what would become *Marthe*. He did so, it would seem, upon the advice of his friend Henri Céard, the future playwright who introduced Huysmans to Zola, and who had informed Huysmans, earlier that

²⁹ Letter to Eugène Montrosier. Cited by Daniel Grojnowski, without indication of the letter’s date, from an article published by J. Daoust in *L’Information littéraire*, Dec. 1951. “Introduction to *Marthe*...” *Un Joli monde*, p. 3.

³⁰ While Huysmans would surely deny any similarity to a Romantic like Alexandre Dumas *fils*, it seems hard to not see *Marthe* as a descendant of *La Dame aux camélias*, the fictionalized account of the author’s love affair that became a best-selling novel and widely popular play. For more discussion of the 1848 novel as a work of self-promotion, see chapter three. Other elements, which I discuss below, offer stronger evidence of Huysmans’ view of *Marthe*, his first novel, as a way to produce himself as a literary great.

³¹ *Les Romanciers naturalistes*, Paris, 1881

summer, that his role model was also working on a novel about a prostitute. It thus seems entirely logical that Huysmans sent Goncourt a copy of *Marthe* on the day it was released. However, the primary reason he gives for writing is that his début novel had been seized by the authorities and faced imminent censorship.

In his letter, the as-yet unknown writer expresses his admiration for Goncourt's talent, before asking the well-connected public figure to read *Marthe* and to issue a public statement defending a fellow artist's book, one that had been unjustly seized at the border "comme outrageant la morale publique."³² The decision to confiscate the novel, he says, had been made solely based on the work's subject matter, which was clearly announced in the subtitle, *histoire d'une fille*. Huysmans seems, at first, to seek the established author's sympathy on account of their coterminous treatment of the same subject.³³ However, as he continues, it becomes clear that the younger writer wishes, instead, to underline how his privileging of style over content unites him with Goncourt. Here, in his plea for the author's public support, Huysmans rare repetition of words emphasizes his novel as a work of art, and himself as an artist under Goncourts' tutelage:

Je ne comprends pas. J'ai cru, en mon âme et conscience, faire *une œuvre d'art*, morale et antiérotique. [...] Quand un auteur s' imagine avoir fait *œuvre d'artiste*, et qu'il se trouve condamné sous prévention de pornographie, il ne peut qu'en appeler aux maîtres qu'il aime, les suppliant de lire son livre et de le défendre, de vive voix, contre les accusations insanes qui pèsent sur lui.³⁴

³² Letter dated October 1, 1876, published in *Lettres inédites à Edmond de Goncourt*, Ed. Pierre Lambert, Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1956, p. 47.

³³ "À la demande que j'ai adressée à la censure de faire mettre des cartons, il fut répondu : C'est inutile *le sujet même est suffisant* pour justifier la saisie du livre." Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

This double insistence on his status as an artist seems to be the point of these lines expressing his utter surprise and dismay at the censors' action. However, the writer doth protest too much, methinks. While Huysmans could not have known the *exact* effect that his letter would have on Goncourt, there are reasons—to which we will return momentarily—to believe that the premise of this introductory missive, sent to his idol on the day that his *début* work was censored, was more than a happy accident. But first, let us turn now to Goncourt's response.

In his journal entry for October 3, 1876, Edmond de Goncourt records his receipt of the letter and novel from “un jeune homme, nommé Huysmans.”³⁵ Then, as what many scholars have interpreted as evidence of the anxiety provoked by the news he had learned, he relates the dream he had later that night.³⁶ Panic would be a perfectly understandable reaction: Huysmans' letter informed him that not only had a younger, unknown writer just published a novel similar to the one that he was currently working on, but also that this writer's newly-released novel had been censored purely on account of its subject matter. Appropriately, in the dream he describes, Goncourt finds himself imprisoned for having merely written *La Fille Elisa*, which was then somehow censored even before it had been published. In this prison, he writes, he is thrown into a crowd of other literary hopefuls who seem to be awaiting execution. His distinction is doubly lost in the crowd of men about to be killed.³⁷

It is hard to guess which was the greater potential source of his anxiety for Goncourt: having been scooped or the threat that his own work may face censorship. The co-writing

³⁵ “Vendredi 3 octobre,” *Journal des Goncourts: mémoire de la vie littéraire*, vol. V (1872-1877), Paris: Charpentier, 1891, p. 289.

³⁶ I will later nuance the justifiable claim that the silencing of Elisa in prison is linked to Goncourt's fear of censorship. For references to the dream in making this argument, see p. 62 of Laure Katsaros, “Goncourt's Dream: Night Terrors in *La Fille Elisa*,” *French Forum* 34.2 (2001), 61-78; and p. 92 in Gabrielle Houbre, “Le Mauvais procès de *La Fille Élis*a,” *Francofonia* 21 (1991), 87-96.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

brothers had been preparing their novel about a prostitute, *La Fille Elisa*, since at least 1862, well before Jules, the younger brother, died in 1870, just before the violent outbreak of the Commune.³⁸ It had taken the surviving brother several years to take up his pen as a solo novelist. In spite of the brothers' position in Parisian society, their novels had not been exceptionally well received; this story of a prostitute must have thus doubly represented a sort of literary début for Edmond, just as Huysmans' *Marthe* did for him. And yet a heightened fear of censorship would seem equally justified: a new writer by the name of Jean Richepin had just been found guilty of *outrage aux mœurs*, and imprisoned for a month because his volume of poetry, *La Chanson des gueux*, incorporated popular language and included a poem entitled "Fils de fille." The situation must have felt uncannily similar to that of Goncourt's own arrest back in 1852, when he and his brother had faced Imperial censure, arrest, and the correctional tribunal for a journal article in which they too borrowed someone else's vulgar language: they quoted five lines written by a Renaissance poet. While they were ultimately acquitted, the arrest made a lasting impression, and marked the end of their short careers as journalists.³⁹

In light of this, it is easy to see why scholars have referred to Goncourt's dream as evidence of his fear of formal censorship. And yet, while the narration does indeed seem to depict an anxiety-induced nightmare, upon closer investigation, we see that, in fact, it also illustrates a condensed method for transforming the experience of censorship into a means of resistance. In his dream, the author is angry at being one in a roomful of Baudelaire-esque writers on trial: "On conçoit facilement ma fureur intérieure du procédé gouvernemental, et elle

³⁸ Robert Ricatte's genetic study of the *carnets* remains, justifiably, the primary authority on the Goncourts' preparation of this novel: *La Genèse de 'La Fille Élisabeth'*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960.

³⁹ For a thorough account of the Goncourts' experience of censorship, see Peter Vantine, "Censoring/Censuring the Press under the Second Empire: The Goncourts as Journalists and *Charles Demailly*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 43.1-2 (2014-2015): 45-62.

était complétée cette fureur [...] de ce que je me trouvais mêlé [...] à des confrères [...] esthétisant prétentieusement, le monocle dans l'oeil.” Worried that his manuscript had been destroyed, his fury is coupled with a sense of loss. However, he soon realizes that the act of doing research—of seeking intellectual mastery of a subject—assuages all his negative emotions: “il arrivait que mon indignation d’être arrêté, l’horreur de la société au milieu de laquelle je me trouvais, la perte de mon manuscrit, tout cela disparaissait dans la recherche que je faisais....” The topic of his research is how he might position himself near the prostitute-murderers, whom he had been watching on stage, without becoming a subjugated spectacle himself: “sans éveiller l’attention d’un garde-chiourme terrible [...] à côté de moi.” Goncourt’s dream literally exposes the mechanism of the Naturalist author: the scientific gaze makes the writer invisible, in spite of his obvious affiliation with an objectionable subject; censorship, for having depicted the subject of such a gaze, is thus no longer an infuriating, alienating experience: to the contrary, it is proof of a flawless performance of a disappearing act.

Huysmans absolutely could not have known about this dream. But as the admirer of not only *Germinie Lacerteux* but also “de tant d’autres merveilleuses œuvres”⁴⁰, Huysmans was most likely aware of Goncourt’s feelings about state suppression of literature. The brothers had translated the experience of their arrest into their 1860 novel, *Charles Demailly [Les Hommes de lettres]*, a work that used a plot based on the abuse of censorship practices to critique Napoleon III’s control of the press.⁴¹ While an arrest for *outrage aux mœurs* was indeed a possibility in 1876, the political environment was no longer that of the 1850s; for Huysmans, born in 1848, the trials of the 1850s were more legend than reality. The younger writer may not have shared

⁴⁰ Huysmans’ letter to Goncourt, op. cit.

⁴¹ See Vantine, op. cit. The influence of this novel may potentially be discernable in similarities between the journalist and aspiring novelist, Charles, and the talentless journalist and would-be novelist, Léo, in Huysmans’ novel.

Goncourt's experience of arrest, and the residual fear he no doubt felt, but he clearly agreed with the older writer's belief that censorship could function as a code outside the purview of the government censors, and even undermine the dominant regime.

Banned under the Commune, government censorship had indeed been reestablished under the Third Republic's conservative president Mac Mahon in 1871. However, even in the years leading up to the 1877 crisis of *le seize mai*, the primary target of the Republic's repressive forces were political critiques, not novels, even mildly pornographic ones.⁴² As cultural historian René-Pierre Colin points out, it was the Naturalists who were convinced—more than the leaders of the Republic—that the subjects of their writing were shocking enough to incite governmental opprobrium: “les craintes des naturalistes à l'égard de la censure et de la justice demeurent longtemps infondées.”⁴³ Furthermore, Colin adds, the censors were, in practice, much less methodical than they had been under the Second Empire.

Huysmans, a civil servant for the Ministry of the Interior, may have very well suspected that his book could be published without any condemnation whatsoever. By the time that he sought to send *Marthe* to press, it was far more likely for a novel to be tried solely by the press in the court of public opinion and rejected by critics or worse, simply ignored. Huysmans likely knew that the latter would surely be the case were his novel overshadowed by the appearance of a novel on the same subject, written by an established author like Edmond de Goncourt, which is one of the factors that led to his trip to Brussels in August. While he clearly wished to beat

⁴² Plenty of evidence exists to account for Mac Mahon's censorship of materials in the press that were even remotely critical of his regime; and yet, in spite of the seizure of the copies at the border, *Marthe* was ultimately allowed to circulate in France, *uncensored*, as was *Elisa* the following year.

⁴³ “Les Naturalistes à l'assaut de la morale ‘honnête’,” *La Censure en France à l'ère démocratique (1848-...)*, Ed. Pascal Ory, Paris: Editions Complexe, 1997, p. 145-153.

Goncourt to press⁴⁴, Huysmans also anticipated the older novelist's ire should be perceived as a ruthless competitor behind the humble homage.⁴⁵ However, were Huysmans' book to be suppressed immediately upon its publication, it could—given Goncourt's position on censorship—provide the young writer the necessary means by which to ingratiate himself to his “maître,” establish a connection with him, and secure a positive review from a figure capable of helping launch a literary career. Now, is this conjecture sufficient grounds on which to suggest that a writer might have purposefully taken actions to increase his odds of having his own work suppressed by the French government? I believe it might be.

Huysmans' choice to have *Marthe* published in Belgium seems neither entirely cost-driven, as the author himself claimed, nor exclusively the result of a desire to avoid censorship, as previous scholars have argued.⁴⁶ Viewed in light of the delicate position he was in vis-à-vis Edmond de Goncourt (as both competitor and supplicant), the writer's personal interest in *éditions de luxe* and rare books—another trait he shared with the Goncourts—takes on greater importance. What I am suggesting is that the author's view of his own first novel through the eyes of a bibliophile (the importance of which I will discuss more later) supports the notion that he may have actually intended to attract the censors' attention to the first edition of his book.

While it was true that a self-publishing author could save money by having his book printed in Belgium, Huysmans' decision to have *Marthe* published in Brussels could not have been based solely on financial concerns. Indeed, the above-cited letter lauding the reasonable

⁴⁴ Huysmans also insisted that his novel was the first of the two to appear in the preface to the second edition published in Paris in 1879.

⁴⁵ “J'apprends que vous travaillez à un roman qui a nom la *Fille Élis*a. Je me trouve par un hasard malheureux pour moi, avoir travaillé, une année durant, sur un livre dont la donnée est, paraît-il, la même que la vôtre.” Huysmans' letter to Goncourt, op. cit.

⁴⁶ That his primary motivation was to escape censorship seems to be the general consensus on why Huysmans had *Marthe* printed in Brussels, first suggested in Robert Baldick's biography, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, London: Oxford UP, 1955. See also Grojnowski, op. cit., p. 3; Colin, op. cit., p. 147.

cost of publication was written to Eugène Montrosier, the director of *Le Musée des Deux Mondes*, a luxury bi-monthly literary journal. In it, Huysmans describes *Marthe* as a volume that would appeal to collectors like himself: “Un volume abracadabrant, sur papier teinté, avec elzéviros, titres en rouge, pages encadrées, fleurons, culs-de-lampe, et tout cela à moitié prix de Paris.” Huysmans did not just want to be published; he wanted being published to make his work marketable to a certain (elite) literary public. As a bibliophile, Huysmans knew that scarcity drives demand: if a luxury edition is desirable, a *rare* luxury edition is all the more so. Now, he could have reduced his costs and increased the volume’s rarity, by simply having fewer copies of the book printed in Paris. However, were the work to be censored, all copies produced in Paris would be destroyed. If it were not censored, however, if Goncourt had no reason to promote a rival author, *Marthe* would merely be lost in the Parisian sea of self-published books. It is thus possible that the preference for Brussels that Huysmans expressed as a lover of beautiful books appears inextricably linked to the risk of censorship that importing that book implied. By opting to be published in Belgium, and thereby attracting the attention of the censors (whose approbation he was ultimately able to avoid, thanks, in part, to some well-placed work colleagues), the artist was acting as a savvy businessman: he stood only to profit from the ability to promote himself that censorship afforded, and thereby increase not only the price of his books, but the cultural capital of his work.

He was also demonstrating his familiarity with Goncourt’s literary method that found proof of artistic merit in depicting subjects that were so far from amusing as to be prone to censorship. In the 1864 preface to *Germinie Lacerteux*, the Goncourts articulated their theory of representing *le peuple* in literature: in order to do this, the novel, as a modern medium, must be

simultaneously scientific, artistic, and moral.⁴⁷ The authors also insisted that their reader not expect the following book to offer the “saletés érotiques” that filled popular fiction about prostitutes, among other subjects: “Qu’il ne s’attende point à la photographie décolletée du Plaisir: l’étude qui suit est la clinique de l’Amour.”⁴⁸ In combination with his insistence that *Marthe* was “une oeuvre d’art, morale et antiérotique,” the writer’s praise of *Germinie Lacerteux* functions as a nod to that book’s preface. However, if the brothers had challenged the public, in 1864, to criticize their novel (“que ce livre soit calmonié, peu lui importe...”), Huysmans’ plea to Goncourt, over a decade later, paints governmental censorship as the direct effect of putting the latter’s theory into practice. Regardless of whether this was truly the cause, or whether the confiscation had been engineered, Huysmans no doubt expected Goncourt to recognize that the censorship of *Marthe* made for a powerful narrative, capable of galvanizing opinions and mobilizing a literary movement.

Censorship not only situated Huysmans’ début work in the lineage of *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Madame Bovary*; it placed the author in the company of two century’s worth of great French authors whose works were banned or deemed unprintable in France. By having his volumes transported to Paris from a printer in Brussels, Huysmans ensured that his incendiary title could not escape notice. If the city of origin was not enough to draw attention, the name of the editor added an allure of criminality in the eyes of knowing border officers: Huysmans chose to work with Jean Gay, whose name appeared on the title page of other publications smuggled into

⁴⁷ “Préface de la première édition,” published in *Préfaces et Manifestes littéraire*, Paris: Charpentier, 1888. The following passage is illustrative of this preface as a work of literary theory: “Aujourd’hui que le Roman s’élargit et grandit, qu’il commence à être la forme sérieuse, passionnée, vivante, de l’étude littéraire et de l’enquête sociale, qu’il devient, par l’analyse et par la recherche psychologique, l’Histoire morale contemporaine ; aujourd’hui que le Roman s’est imposé les études et les devoirs de la science, il peut en revendiquer les libertés et les franchises. Et qu’il cherche l’Art et la Vérité ; qu’il montre des misères bonnes à ne pas laisser oublier aux heureux de Paris [...] ” (22).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

France. However, rather than trusting Gay to deliver the volumes from the relatively small print-run (a thousand copies, as was customary for a self-published work), Huysmans opted to transport a portion of them himself (around four hundred copies, most of which were seized at the boarder). The rest, he left in Brussels, where they attracted little interest until 1879 when Huysmans' Parisian publisher, Dentu—after releasing the author's second novel, *Les Sœurs Vatarde*—produced a second edition of *Marthe*.

This book appeared with an *avant-propos* by Huysmans justifying the appearance of a new edition: “Ce volume [the first edition], le premier roman que j’ai écrit, a été épuisé en quelques jours. Le prix élevé qu’il a rapidement atteint n’en permet plus l’achat qu’aux amateurs de livres rares” (7). While this *avant-propos* grossly misrepresents the truth about the immediate public demand for it (Gay actually sold the three-hundred and fifty remaining copies to another publisher), it does tell us what Huysmans had hoped would happen, and witnesses to his willingness to use the persona of the author in the interest of promoting his book, as both an intellectual product and material commodity. The physical appearance of the volume itself attests to his anticipation that *Marthe* become an object of interest to both connoisseurs of *écriture artiste* as well as “amateurs de livres rares,” a public that included (but was certainly not limited to) Edmond de Goncourt and the other writers that would shortly take up the defense of Naturalism.

In 1876, the group that would meet at Zola's Médan residence was not yet fully formed. It was the remaining Goncourt brother who thus seemed, to Huysmans, posed to be the preeminent figure of literary innovation. Thanks to the circulation of his *histoire d'une fille*, within a relatively small literary circle, the civil servant turned author had successfully made a name for himself as a forerunner of literary innovation. As we have seen, while a certain fear of

censorship (like Goncourt's) was not entirely unfounded, an undemocratic enjoyment of the notoriety it produced, and the escape behind the veil of scientific authority that it justified, were clearly consequences—if perhaps unintended—of the Republic's efforts to legislate bourgeois values in literature.

The following year, when the debate over morality of *L'Assommoir* and the whole of the Naturalist movement took center stage, Huysmans would be considered one of the point men for a literary movement that consistently reappropriated bourgeois criticism. This kind of reappropriation—whether it was secretly dreaming of being censored or proudly owning up to the insulting epithet of “communards de la littérature”—is another product of nineteenth-century capitalist democracy that would remain an effective counter-cultural tactic.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The phrase is from a letter Huysmans wrote to Théo Hannon, March 21, 1877.

The literature produced in nineteenth-century Paris offered readers a variety of prostituted women, often in juxtaposition with artists who are metaphorically prostituted to the demands of their public. From *courtisanes* like Balzac's Esther Gobseck, whose control of artifice recalls the venal journalist, to street-walkers like Goncourt's Elisa, whose unsettling circulation cannot be restricted by even the most rigorous censorship, the fictional public women seen standing at the intersection of desire and capital played a key role in helping writers define their profession. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, literate venal women appear repeatedly juxtaposed with young writers. The prostituted woman acts like a negative in a work that produces the image of the ideal author as a man of genius and skill, uncompromised by the public circulation and self-promotion that the new literary market demanded. The axiology of the upstanding (male) novelist that comes out of the century thus may generally seem to be a product of gendered divisions of labor, an aspect of the dominant ideology that makes the bourgeois (heterosexual) family inseparable from bourgeois capitalism.

And so, it is now time to complicate—and even queer—the reductive tendency to see the narrative control of prostitutes, and the resulting socio-economic control of the literary marketplace, as a system produced through—and traced exclusively on—female bodies. Indeed, for some Parisian men, being prostituted was *not* a figure of speech. The visibility of sexually available to men in public space increased over the course of the Second Empire and continued well into the Third Republic.¹ Accordingly, in his expansive novel about becoming the next great

¹ William Peniston adroitly studies the confusion of all same-sex relations in public and prostitution in the two book-length studies from this time: Louis Canler's *Mémoires* (1882) and Felix Carlier's *Les Deux prostitutions* (1887). See his *Pederasts and Others; Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, New York: Routledge, 2011.

French author, *A la recherche du temps perdu*², modernist author Marcel Proust not only inserts a scene in a male brothel in the work's final volume. He also includes, throughout the entire second half of the work, Charles Morel, an intriguing, complex character who plays multiple roles, including that of a male *courtisane* and even a pay-by-the-night prostitute. Morel, says contemporary literary scholar Elizabeth Ladenson, is "indeed one of the most problematic figures in the *Recherche*."³ As we shall see, while Morel's "problematic" nature may be due, in part, to his complicated relationship to the separate masculine and feminine spheres in bourgeois society, for Proust, his sex is not as central to his role as his social function. In addition to being a prostitute, Morel is also an artist: he circulates as a writer and a musician. Thus, I argue that, as a composite product of all his various roles, the artist-prostitute Morel serves as a complimentary figure to the hero (referred to as "Marcel"), making him—like the literate prostitutes I have studied in the preceding chapters—a negative image of the Proustian figure of the modern author.

In this chapter, I will begin by considering how including a male prostitute places Proust's work in the lineage of realist novels: the character of Morel, as he first appears in the *Recherche*, prepares Proust's reader to be transported beyond the familiar world of female actresses and *courtisanes* into the sociological reality of Parisian homosexual subculture, which included prostitution. However, because, for Proust, an accurate representation of material reality is hardly the point of a great work of art, I will shift the focus to the relationship between art and prostitution, as a generality that exceeds sexual difference. My reading of the "prostitutional economy" articulated through the brothel scene in *Le Temps retrouvé* reveals an anxiety around

² I will abbreviate the title of the entire seven-volume work to the *Recherche* (or *R* in page references) for the sake of concision. Individual volume titles, when relevant, will be given in full. All page numbers refer to the Gallimard Quarto Edition (2006).

³ *Proust's Lesbianism*, Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1999. p. 20.

the public exposure of certain kinds of labor: sexual gratification and artistic production. In closing, I demonstrate that understanding this anxiety helps clarify Proust's distinction of Morel, in whom these two kinds of labor are united, as a central character of the Recherche.

Sexual Difference

Marcel Proust's expansive work, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, is composed of seven volumes, written between 1909 and 1922 (when Proust died), and published between 1913 and 1927. In them, Proust's narrator not only reimagines late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French society; he also rewrites the rules for representing it: rules inherited from realist novelists ranging from Balzac to the Goncourts. If the latter writers had dared incorporate socially objectionable figures such as the *courtisane* and the *fille* into works that legitimized the realist novel's claim to aesthetic valor, Proust shows that he is thoroughly capable of doing so as well, and moreover, of adapting the truthful depiction of reality to his pursuit of a modernist aesthetic. Over the course of his novel, the plot of which spans the Belle Époque through the end of World War I, the Narrator repeatedly depicts the total collapse of distance between members of the highest Parisian aristocracy and members of the working and popular classes. Marcel—the protagonist of *La recherche* and the future author of a book just like it—resembles, in many ways, the young literary hopefuls of earlier novels. Following in the footsteps of Balzac's Lucien, Dumas fils' Armand, and Zola's Fauchery in his pursuit of a literary career, Marcel strives to make a place for himself in Parisian society. His subsequent acquaintances come to include women of the *demi-monde* and the theatre in addition to noble women and wealthy *bourgeoises*.

In *Un Amour de Swann*—the Narrator’s demonstration of his ability to perform the nineteenth-century realist novel—the reader encounters Odette, a *courtisane* whose crass carnality rivals that of Zola’s Nana. The wealthy aesthete, Charles Swann, justifies his interest in Odette by seeing her as the subject of a work of art, recalling writers like Huysmans. However, unlike the venal women in novels up to this point, Odette escapes punishment for her social mobility: she ends *Le Temps retrouvé* not as a repulsive cadaver, but as an elegant duchess. The Narrator also observes, first hand, the social ascendancy of another prostitute-turned-*courtisane*-turned-actress, Rachel. It is because Marcel meets her in a brothel, that he can then recognize her when she appears again as the mistress of his aristocratic friend, Robert de Saint-Loup.

Yet, in addition to calling on the familiar trope of the venal woman, Proust also shows he understood the spirit of the realist tradition of representing venal women: their common purported goal in doing so was to define the limits of art by pushing the envelope of subjects considered suitable for artistic representation. Thus, in addition to calling on the cast of characters previously considered marginal to high art—domestic servants, Jews, *courtisanes*, prostitutes—Proust’s narrator also introduces the figure of a male prostitute into his highly aestheticized novel. He thereby makes a real, working-class subculture visible in a work that has often been accused of elitism.⁴ True, such characters were not unknown to readers of “romans montmartrois,” popular novels depicting the lower depths of society: pimps, prostitutes and gigolos living and working in Montmartre.⁵ But for the more literary-minded audience that Proust’s novels targeted, the inclusion of a man’s relations with a male prostitute would have been surprising. And yet, unlike earlier writers who unabashedly sought to “épater les

⁴ Leroy, Fabrice.

⁵ See L. Schehr’s discussion of the *roman montmartrois* in general, and author Francis Carco in particular, in *French Gay Modernism*, 2004, p. 130-177; and Nicholas White’s study *The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* New York: Cambridge UP, 1993, p. 151.

bourgeois,” a desire to shock his readers, or to accurately depict a world that he himself frequented, does not suffice to explain Proust’s decision to include male prostitution.

The reader’s experience of seeing something that had been present in their worldview, but marginalized by their inability to recognize it, is essential to the epistemology the *Recherche*. In the two chapters devoted to Proust in *French Gay Modernism*, Lawrence Schehr describes this practice as “revelation,” which implies a form of repetition that produces difference. Making a marginalized element of society visible calls the reader to engage with its undeniable presence. Yet the Proustian art of revelation exceeds this. Seeing, and then seeing again through the lens of narration, is what makes the element become “readable.” The reader of the *Recherche* is invited to go beyond surface impressions and received notions to interrogate meaning.

Male prostitution is one such element, marginal to Proust’s readers, that has, oddly, remained marginal to Proustian scholarship. While critics like Schehr, Ladenson, and Michael Lucey have extensively studied homosexuality in the *Recherche*, and some commentary exists on the collapse of the *salon* and the female brothel, the presence of male, homosexual prostitution has avoided scholarly attention.⁶ Perhaps what happens in the male brothel in *Le temps retrouvé* seems to break the rules of revelation with the sudden visibility of something more unrecognizable than homosexual relations or sadomasochism. Perhaps, as Marcel says, “cette maison est tout autre chose, plus qu’une maison de fous, puisque la folie des aliénés est mise en scène, reconstituée, visible” (R 2236). The brothel, as a site that exceeds the formerly separate categories of homosexuality and prostitution, is “autre,” even beyond the reader’s understanding of homosexuality (“fous”), developed over the course of the novel.

⁶ On homosexuality in Proust, see, for example, the above-cited works by Schehr and Ladenson, Michael Lucey’s *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide and Proust*. Duke UP, 2006. Studies focusing exclusively on female prostitution in Proust seem limited to the work of Fabrice Leroy. See below.

However, this is not, in fact, the case. The reader discovers the world of male prostitution as he does everything else: gradually, through the eyes of Marcel—the Narrator’s naive past self—who comes to recognize what he has witnessed by re-presenting it. After helping the Baron hire a young musician to (purportedly) perform at his house, Marcel comes to understand the scene by recalling the trope of heterosexual prostitution. He remarks, “me rappelant la façon dont M. de Charlus était venu vers [le musicien...], je saisisais sa ressemblance avec certains de ses parents quand ils levaient une femme dans la rue. Seulement l’objet visé avait changé de sexe” (1406). Thus, at first reading, male prostitution does appear barely distinguishable from female prostitution. This, however, is part of the strategy of revelation: the first impression is often not only superficial, but it often appears to be the exact opposite of the truth that a second impression will expose.

Let us, therefore, return to Marcel’s first impression. The musician that Charlus hired was none other than Charles Morel, who appears in the second half of *Le côté de Guermantes* as the son of a valet to Marcel’s relative, Uncle Adolphe. Morel brings Marcel some racy photographs of women, pictures that his father had set aside when Uncle Adolphe’s art collection was sold. This scene has two contradictory readings. On one level, we see why Marcel was not prepared to see the musician as a prostitute because of the literary tradition he was so familiar with that dictated an opposition between venal bodies and those empowered to circulate representations of them. On another level, however, the savvy reader is able to recognize the trope of the *courtisane* in the depiction of Morel as an *arriviste*.

Morel successfully gains spatial and social intimacy—access to Marcel’s bedroom and sociolinguistic intimacy (signaled by his *tutoiement* of Marcel)—thanks to some racy photographs of *cocottes*. Like a photograph, the young Morel presents a dazzling surface that communicates

everything in detail but omits the truth of the working-class body beneath it: “Je fus surpris de voir entrer un beau garçon de dix-huit ans, habillé plutôt richement qu’avec goût, mais qui pourtant avait l’air de tout, excepté d’un valet de chambre” (948). His “air de tout” shows Morel’s eagerness to escape his class origins, while his rich, tasteless dress aligns him with the would-be dandy that recalls the uninitiated Lucien Chardon. While sexual difference would distinguish him from the women in the photographs, his presence in Marcel’s bedroom reads—to us, if not to the hero—as a cue that his circulation in society recalls the profession of the photos’ subjects. By bringing Marcel images that typically functioned both as material to accompany masturbation and as advertisements to attract clients to a brothel, Morel infiltrates a social rung above his birth by aligning himself with objects intended to both satisfy and pique sexual desire.

When Marcel picks one particular photograph out of the bunch, one of Elstir’s portrait of “Miss Sacripant,” Morel reacts by saying he had meant to bring that very photo to Marcel’s attention: “mon père m’avait recommandé d’attirer votre attention sur cette dame. [...] Il paraît que vous aviez plu beaucoup à cette femme légère” (950). It is impossible to know for certain whether this was a lie, but it certainly seems suspect. Morel’s comment, however, shows his fine attunement to expressions of his interlocutor’s desire. In spite of Marcel’s dislike for Morel, the hero will continue to ask him about Odette and her relationships with his uncle, Swann and Charlus. Morel then doubles the value of the photo by claiming that Marcel’s interest in it confirms his similarity to a respected male figure. By doing so, he uses knowledge acquired from his father to flatter Marcel and ingratiate himself to him, positioning himself and the hero opposite the *cocotte*, on the side of the Oncle’s definitively masculine gaze.

And yet, by doing so he seeks to increase his own value to Marcel, which, to the reader of the *Recherche* suggests the position of the literary *courtisane*. He reifies himself by virtue of his

claim to familiarity with the doubly commodified object of male desire: the photo of the woman for hire. For Morel, knowledge of culture is less an authentic product of social distinction than a sign of it: as such, it can be treated as a mask to be donned and removed at will.

It quickly becomes clear to Marcel that Morel's purpose in bringing him the photographs was to promote himself as an artist. This similarity between the hero and the musician may also explain his later reluctance to see Morel as a prostitute. Marcel, who imagines that Morel's father must have painted him as a future Racine, is sensitive to his plight. However, the hero distances himself from Morel and critiques an ambitious behavior that the reader can see is all too similar to his own.

Je me rendis vite compte que le fils de Morel était très 'arriviste.' Ainsi ce jour-là il me demanda, étant un peu compositeur aussi, et capable de mettre quelques vers en musique, si je ne connaissais pas de poète ayant une situation importante dans le monde 'aristo'. Je lui en citai un. Il ne connaissait pas les oeuvres de ce poète et n'avait jamais entendu son nom, qu'il prit en note. Or je sus que peu après il avait écrit à ce poète pour lui dire qu'admirateur fanatique de ses oeuvres, il avait fait de la musique sur un sonnet de lui et serait heureux que le librettiste en fit donner une audition chez la comtesse ***. C'était aller un peu vite et démasquer son plan. (949).

It is of note that Marcel critiques Morel here for two things: first, for not having enough personal knowledge of the poet's work before trying to build on it, and second, for having revealed his plan by acting too quickly. What sets these two young men from different classes apart, what differentiates Marcel from Morel here, is thus not a self-promoting practice but a lack of depth and an excessive visibility.

Morel is thus, from the beginning, the embodiment of a practice of revelation that works counter to the laws of the work of art that Marcel will come to create. And yet establishing his similarity is an important part of the practice of learning to read beneath the surface. Morel's sex, in that it appears identical, at first, to Marcel's, is thus part of the process of distinguishing the true artist.

Reading Male Prostitution

Over four hundred pages separate Marcel's first encounter with Morel and the next time he sees him, at the train station in Doncières, where Charlus will hire him to "play music." During this time, Marcel (and his reader) come to a richer understanding of homosexuality, thanks to the courtyard scene between Charlus and his lover Jupien that opens the volume entitled *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. This scene is characterized by the multiplicity of metaphors that the Narrator uses to describe the two men courting, then having sex: while Marcel does not see their dance, their pollination, he overhears everything from his veiled location.

The train station scene that we will now consider is thus initially remarkable for the fact that Marcel appears to have "forgotten" to be on the look-out for male homosexual desire.⁷ The difference that his failure to recognize signals is, indeed, important to a thorough understanding of Morel's role in the *Recherche*. During the Second Empire and the Third Republic, Paris gave rise to a rising working-class homosexual subculture, a culture that Proust's readers may have previously considered beyond the scope of artistic representation, if not also something that

⁷ In "Proust: Forgetting Homosexuality," the first chapter of *French Gay Modernism*, Schehr writes, "the narrator desires to have readers focus on the subjective position of the adolescent character, who is unaware of exactly what is happening and who is still confused by contradictory information and signs. To identify with the learning process and apprenticeship of Marcel as he becomes the narrator and to follow the bildungsroman as such, readers cannot occupy a position totally superior in knowledge to Marcel; rather, they should sympathetically identify with Marcel's incomprehension" (16).

should remain invisible in real life. In the train station scene, Morel's return into Marcel's field of sight thus transports the reader beyond heterosexual prostitution into the reality of homosexual prostitution. The face of this cultural reality seemed radically different from the scene between Jupien and Charlus, whose homosexuality could still be restricted to the aristocracy, and dismissed as the effete eccentricity of a dying class.

In *Sodome et Gomorrhe II*, Marcel, having begun his relationship with Albertine, is personally learning about the instability of signs of love. He is thus distracted when he runs into Charlus at the station, where the Baron is supposedly waiting to catch a train to Paris. He recounts first his impression of Charlus' youthful appearance, and then his request that Marcel do him the following favor: "il me demanda de vouloir bien appeler un militaire, parent à lui, qui était de l'autre côté de la voie exactement comme s'il allait monter dans notre train, mais en sens inverse" (1405). As Marcel approaches the young man, and realizing it is Morel begins to speak with him, Charlus barges in and offers him five hundred francs to play music at his house that evening. Once back on the train, Marcel wonders how Charlus knew Morel until it dawns on him that he had just witnessed the Baron picking up a young man, a complete stranger.

While Proust's reader may recognize the trope of the train traveling in the opposite direction as a sign of homosexuality, and easily read in the invitation to play music a proposition of sex, Marcel does not comprehend what had just happened until he replays the scene in his mind. The line cited earlier tells us that the only framework Marcel is able to fit this scene in to is that of heterosexual prostitution: "me rappelant la façon dont M. de Charlus était venu vers Morel et moi, je saisisais sa ressemblance avec certains de ses parents quand ils levaient une femme dans la rue. Seulement l'objet visé avait changé de sexe" (1406). However, this

framework, the reader realizes, is in fact, insufficient. Male prostitution *is*, in some ways, a distinct social reality from the system that has become so familiar by now.

The encounter between Charlus and Morel effectively represents a number of elements of a code proper to what William Peniston and Regis Revenin describe in their studies of police records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a Parisian homosexual “subculture”.⁸ Working- and middle-class homosexual men looking for friendship, sex, relationships, etc. appropriated to their own uses the new modern, urban spaces. Just as venal women had appropriated the *passages* for the purpose of propositioning unknown passers-by, men, too, frequented *passages* and train stations. Such spaces allowed, and even promoted, anonymous intermingling between people of varying ages and class backgrounds, in a setting built on—and synonymous with—growing consumerism. Although “young men in their twenties and thirties were at the center” of this subculture (Peniston 5), and the aristocrats and bourgeois men were a minority, wealthy and/or older men did also appear in these spaces, as the arrests documented in police files indicate. Thus, while Marcel is confused by Charlus’ presence at the station in Doncières when he has no intention of getting on a train, as well as the cold cream, dried mustache, and “l’animation du teint chez un être encore jeune” (*R* 1405), his behavior is far from curious to someone familiar with this marginal culture. However, as we shall see, Proust’s inclusion of particular aspects of this culture exceeds the realist practice of proving a work of art by its ability to depict what is.

Given the public nature of these meeting places, homosexual subculture redefines visibility, as prostitution had for writers since Balzac, which makes it valuable in understanding the Proustian aesthetic. Public spaces, with little seclusion, afforded couples limited privacy, and

⁸ A “subculture” can be loosely defined as a group of people with something in common, with a reputation for creativity and nonconformity, who are not tied to neighborhoods or families (Peniston 67-68)

working-class men could afford an apartment like “Charmes” where Charlus would meet Morel, exhibitionism, and its pair, voyeurism (this important part of the narrative practice in the Proustian novel), became part of the sexual practice. Homosexual eroticism was not limited to brothels, as suggested by the cases of arrests for public masturbation, alone, in pairs or groups, or sodomy, recorded on the Champs Elysées, the boulevard des Capucines, and near the Gare Saint-Lazare (Peniston 95).⁹ And while meeting in public is not criminal, sex in public is: when the invisible signs led to visible behavior, the effects of “reading” can be considered a crime.

Proust translates this aspect of homosexual culture into the general law of metaphor and its gradual unpacking—what Gilles Deleuze calls *apprentissage*—that governs the progression of the *Recherche*.¹⁰ While Marcel had proven able to understand the metaphors in the scene between Charlus and Jupien, he fails to read signs in the train station that were evident to both Morel and Charlus. The two easily navigate a vocabulary of metaphor, in which “music” takes the place of sex: “Je désirais entendre ce soir un peu de musique, dit-il à Morel sans aucune entrée en matière, je donne cinq-cents francs pour la soirée, cela pourrait avoir quelque intérêt pour un de vos amis, si vous en avez dans la musique” (1405).

The difference between the courtyard scene and the train station at Doncières is the shift of homosexuality from private to public space. “Reading” subtle signs in public places was indeed required of men in this subculture who wished to satisfy their sexual desire without risking arrest for solicitation. But moreover, by including male prostitution in the novel, Proust introduces a new dynamic of reading difference between what is visible and what can only

⁹ Proust’s narrator offers a similar, if less detailed, account in *La Prisonnière* of one *flânerie* between the “quartier aristocratique” and Montmartre that suggests the Narrator was not unaware of availability of venal men, even while reinscribing the notion they didn’t exist. He mistakes a male driver for a woman on the sidewalk (une “trottoireuse?”): “Sur le trottoir une femme peu élégante [...] passait, trop clair dans un paletot sac en poil de chèvre ; mais non, ce n’était pas une femme, c’était un chauffeur qui, enveloppé dans sa peau de bique, gagnait à pied son garage” (1705)

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964.

become readable. Up to this point, if it was difficult to distinguish the *courtisane* from the bourgeois woman, at least it was easy to distinguish a prostitute from her client. If the courtyard scene taught us that some people who look like men may be women at heart, this scene moves us toward the conclusion that an object's readability depends more on the way it is read than on a truth intrinsic to the object itself.

As Morel's appearances in the *Recherche* increase, he will often be misread by characters representative of the bourgeoisie, unable to bridge the distance between prostitution and homosexuality, and between homosexual prostitution and the society they know. Doctor Cottard will misinterpret his observation of Charlus' frequent trips into the public urinals as the effect of an illicit encounter with a *fille publique* rather than the prelude to one with a man, in spite of the obvious fact that women were not permitted to use the new *vespasiennes*. For Mme de Cambremer, who is aware of Charlus' sexuality, the possibility of having a kept man in her salon is so out of the question that she either consciously or unconsciously separates the violinist's name from the venal body linked to Charlus: "Pressée de questions, Mme de Cambremer finit par dire: 'On prétend que c'est lui qui faisait vivre un monsieur Moreau, Morille, Morue, je ne sais plus. Aucun rapport, bien entendu, avec Morel, le violoniste,' ajouta-t-elle en rougissant" ().

Now, this breakdown of the language of difference is not imposed by the author: it was native to the representation of homosexuality in the dominant discourse. The *police des mœurs* were eager to arrest homosexual men, whom they believed criminal in nature, in spite of the decriminalization of sodomy during the Revolution at the end of the eighteenth-century. However, the police did not always choose to describe the precise nature of the encounters they would record simply as "public offences against decency": they instead seemed to prefer vague terms that implied the men's illicit behavior. Louis Canler, chief of the *Service de Sûreté* in the

mid-nineteenth century, and Félix Carlier, chief of the *Service des mœurs* under the Second Empire both used the language of prostituted women and criminals to categorize homosexual men, regardless of the actual nature of the relationship between the men arrested.¹¹ Perhaps due to a shared desire to not see them, or as a result of the vague language, the police, and the bourgeoisie at large, didn't always know how to interpret what they saw.

In contrast to Cottard and Mme de Cambremer, however, the reader must recognize that Marcel quickly moves from seeing to understanding. By replaying the scene through the lens of his own experience, Marcel demonstrates his capacity to interpret the scene between Charlus and Morel. It is of note that he compares his "reading" of the scene to police surveillance: "la hauteur avec laquelle M. de Charlus avait toisé le violoniste [...] eut été reconnue par les trois quarts des gens du monde, [...] non pas par le préfet de police qui, quelques années plus tard, le faisait surveiller" (1406). The use of the verb "toiser" recalls the gaze Marcel himself had miscategorized earlier as potentially criminal when he was its object. This movement makes the introduction of male prostitution into the *Recherche* an opportunity to complicate the relationship between a work of art's use of a subject and the material reality of that subject.

The first step in the practice of revelation is the replacement of one thing by its opposite. While imagining the opposite may lead to an imperfect reading, at least it is preferable not being able to understand what one sees. On the train, Marcel imagines an unlikely scenario in which Charlus had made Morel's acquaintance through Albertine, then he reverses his reading of the situation: "M. de Charlus ne connaissait pas le moins du monde Morel, ni Morel M. de Charlus." What this first opposition makes immediately visible is the function of money in a society that

¹¹ Canler's book reports on his findings over the course of his career as the chief of the detective division (the *Service de Sûreté*) under the Second Empire. Half the book is devoted to "the relationships between blackmailers and 'antiphysicals,' as he termed men who had sex with other men" (Peniston 22). Carlier, the chief of the vice squad (the *Service des mœurs*) responsible for the regulation of prostitution, also "focused half his book on prostitution to the sexual commerce between working-class boys and middle class men" (24).

Marcel is only beginning to understand: “En tout cas l’offre des cinq cents francs avait dû remplacer pour Morel l’absence de relations antérieures” (1406). Charlus’ offer of payment replaces (and, as we shall see later, paradoxically excludes) the prior laws of social encounters in which personal or professional relationships depended on a common past, shared interests, or identity of class. Once this is clear to Marcel, he is able to recognize this as the destabilizing power formerly ascribed to heterosexual prostitution. It is only then, after reminding himself what Charlus’ gaze implies, that he is able to replace the female prostitute with its analogue/other, Morel.

The woman in the street gives way to a body that seems to code clearly as masculine, to the extent that Charlus already views the young man with an eye for the masochism that will be fully revealed in the brothel scene: “M. Charlus vit avec ravissement ce geste autoritaire et viril [...] avec une fermeté et une souplesse précoces qui donnait à cet adolescent encore imberbe l’air d’un jeune David capable d’assumer un combat contre Goliath” (1407). And yet the masculinity that Charlus reads on his body is denied by the underlying truth of the prostitutional economy: the Baron is safe in assuming that the young man will, in the public space of the train station, play the “passive” (i.e. feminine) role in the sense that, given the social and financial disproportionality of the two men, Morel has little basis on which to refuse the engagement made entirely on Charlus’ terms.¹²

Just as it will later in the brothel scene, the exaggerated visibility of the capital that erupts into the scene indicates that something else is at play, something other than the Baron’s excessive generosity. The offer of five hundred francs is five times what the Prince de

¹² While this initial stability of their unequal power dynamic, of course, does not last, the expectation would remain a constant whenever Morel and Charlus appeared together in public: “... souvent Charlie, même devant tous les fidèles, avait l’air irrité au lieu de paraître toujours heureux et soumis, *comme eût souhaité le baron...*” (emphasis mine).

Guermantes will pay Morel later for one night with him, and fifty times the average price of “une passe” in the average male brothel (Revernin). I would like to suggest that the elevated price is the sign of a shift in what will suffice to define one *arriviste* from another, to distinguish an artist from a prostitute. In the absence of physical sexual difference, the gendering of class difference becomes more apparent. While, as a prostitute, Morel will accept the Baron’s money, when he tries to distinguish himself as an artist later in the novel, the feminized financial and social position that their relationship traces onto him will become unbearable.

The presence of Morel, as a male prostitute, in Proust’s notes dates from 1909: he is part of the work even before Albertine, the hero’s main love interest. Francine Goujon, in her study of Proust’s manuscripts, points out the paradox of Morel expressed by a note in the margin of the author’s workbook: “Les tantes ne plaisent pas aux tantes seul avantage de Morel/ la plus grande tante” (95). Morel is thus the *opposite* of “une tante,” in that he pleases Charlus, “la tante de Frankfurt,” a woman in a man’s body... but, at the same time, Proust says, he is the very embodiment of a “tante.” How is this possible? In the context of prostitution, this is not a contradiction. Morel must consciously decide to take advantage of his masculine appearance, which makes him appeal to Charlus; in so doing, he demonstrates his ability to manipulate the codes surrounding the word “tante” in its application in a bourgeois setting. However, the word also belongs, as Proust would have known, to the lower register of working-class slang. Given his origins in the working class, and his apparent familiarity with the urban homosexual subculture and both sides of the law, Morel is a “tante” based on the use of the term as it would appear in Canler’s categorization: “men who had acquired same-sex sexual habits while in prison. [...] Most of the *tantes* reverted to heterosexuality once they regained their freedom, but some joined the professional blackmailers [...] in an attempt to turn their acquired habits into

profits” (Peniston 28). Thus, for Proust, Morel can be both entirely masculine, and occupy a feminized economic position. Furthermore, this position would feel, to him, like imprisonment.

Charlus’ condescending gaze reinscribes the social distance between the two men typical of a homosexual prostitutional relationship. The majority of the arrests of same-sex couples during the Third Republic suggest a trend toward more egalitarian relationships between men of similar age and class-origin; however, some cross-class couples would have resulted from daily interaction, exemplified in *La recherche* by Charlus’ relationship with Jupien. But generally, according to Peniston, there was a marked decline in the “Ancient Greek” model – older man who plays the “active” role with a younger “passive” man – except in cases of prostitution. “Because the elites frequently sought out working-class men, and because they also maintained a distance from this sexual underground, they were undoubtedly offering money or gifts in exchange for sexual favors” (6). Charlus and Morel will never be able to “read” each other perfectly, given the distance between the contexts from which they perceive the same exchange of money and sexual favors.

Due in part to the prostitutional nature of their encounter, and in part to Charlus’ tenacious hold on the old feudal hierarchy, neither Charlus nor Morel are able to move past the early modern model, in which the “younger man, typically a boy between fifteen and eighteen, was the submissive partner, in a transitional state of sexual passivity, out of which he was expected to grow. In his twenties, he would become the active bisexual and in his thirties, the married man” (6). In fact, their relationship seems to be almost an exaggerated performance of this model, leading Marcel to remark to Albertine immediately following his observation of the two men’s encounter at the train station, that they seem to be actors playing a scene (*R*).

Indeed, this kind of relationship *was* dramatized at the time by print media and fictional works, adding a spectacular layer to practices of homosexual prostitution that would have been visible generally only if one knew where to look. Not only is the 1907 “affaire Eulenburg,” a legal battle between two German noblemen accused of sodomy, traced on to the relationship between Charlus and the military musician, as Antoine Compagnon has shown based on Proust’s correspondence. Another well-known example from the 1870’s is the trial of the Comte Charles-Eugène Le Bègue de Germiny, whose “public offense against decency” with Edmond-Pierre Chouard was sensationalized by the press: his arrest and the subsequent trial was covered by *Le Gaulois*, *Le Petit Journal*, *Le Temps*, *Le Figaro*, and *La Gazette des Tribunaux*. It was also recounted in the Goncourt journal, the same one that Proust inserted via pastiche into his own work. The term “Germinism,” used to mean sodomy or general same-sex sexual activity, appears in several slang dictionaries around the turn of the century. This “Charles-Eu...” may have served as an additional layer to the models for the character of Charlus, whose “germanisme,” is denounced by “les gens du monde” (2185-86), and called “charlisme” only a few pages prior (2170), increasing the parallel between the two noblemen.

The coverage of the Germiny case emphasized Chouard’s youth and impressionability: “According to *La Gazette de Tribunaux*, “he was almost a child, beardless, with a pale complexion and effeminate face.” *Le Figaro* also noticed “his almost infantile countenance” (Peniston 153). Charlus makes repeated references throughout their relationship to “Charlie” Morel’s youth and femininity, and remains as protective of him as he would “une jeune fille,” posing as his mentor (*R*). But even at the initial encounter at the train station, this is slightly undermined as the Narrator compares the Baron’s admiration to that for a child who is surprisingly mature for his age (1407). Like Charlus, Germiny was observed during his frequent

use of the public urinal, and charged with solicitation, and judged in the public eye for corrupting the young man. According to later reports, however, it was rather Chouard who took advantage of Germiny, playing up his innocent appearance in court, when in fact he was part of a group of young men with multiple records for offenses against decency.

In fact, this connection to either or both real events turned legend by the press is not even external to the passage. The Narrator, reflecting on Charlus' expressed desire to hear some music that evening, equates what the hero has just seen with an unnamed true story: "...je commençais à trouver que les 'reconnaisances' exprimeraient au contraire une part importante de la vie, *si on savait aller jusqu'au romanesque vrai*, quand tout d'un coup j'eus un éclair et compris que j'avais été bien naïf" (1406, emphasis mine). Here, being familiar with sensational commercial writing, *le romanesque vrai*—the kind of writing that had been codified in the previous century as the kind of metaphorical "prostitution" that men were seen to engage in—is placed in opposition to naïveté. The Narrator, passing through *faits divers*, continually corrects his ignorance, now drawing for his reader a link between heterosexual prostitution, a *lieu commun*, and homosexual prostitution.

As for Morel, he quickly grows irritated with Charlus' infantilization, but not his money. He turns to extortion and blackmail, the second crime most often committed by men with records for offenses to decency, and eventually will use his knowledge of the system of surveillance to avenge himself on Charlus, who he believed had reported his desertion. The system works for him, and he continues to use it. While Morel offers conflicting signs of a desire to "grow out of" the passive role of the early modern model, he remains firmly within the economy of homosexual prostitution, manipulating its stereotypes, even as he actively works to develop relationships with women.

While it appears to be a change in behavior, Morel's interactions with women are, in fact, not outside the economy of prostitution. His attention to Jupien's niece is the product of his desire to climb the social ladder, then to play the hyper-masculine role of the Don Juan, then finally to move into an "active" role, not by his own merit, but by prostituting someone more passive than he:

Morel avait à ce moment-là d'assez fortes crampes à la main et se voyait obligé d'envisager l'éventualité d'avoir à cesser le violon. Comme, en dehors de son art, il était d'une incompréhensible paresse, la nécessité de se faire entretenir s'imposait et il aimait mieux que ce fut par la nièce de Jupien que par M. de Charlus, cette combinaison lui offrant plus de liberté, et aussi un grand choix de femmes différentes, tant par les apprenties toujours nouvelles qu'il chargerait la nièce Jupien de lui débaucher que par les belles dames riches auxquelles il la prostituerait.

Morel cannot imagine himself operating outside this economy of prostitution, where sex is nothing more than a means of acquiring capital. He hopes, at most, to change his position within it, which of course proves unsuitable to his fiancée. The same reenactment of prostitution also governs his eventual relationship with Albertine, for whom he procures young women, the same role that Jupien will fill for Charlus.

Even when the reader learns in the final volume that he has "settled down" with a woman, it is not framed by love, but rather by the negation of this economy of prostitution. He takes up with a woman who, being stronger-willed than he, realized that the way to keep him to "une fidélité absolue" was to convince him that anything else would put him back into the passive prostituted position: "A défaut d'honneur et de désintéressement, sa 'femme' lui avait inculqué un certain respect humain, qui ne détestait pas d'aller jusqu'à la bravade et à

l'ostentation que tout l'argent du monde lui était égal quand il lui était offert dans certaines conditions” (2196-97). While he is still arguably in a passive position, Morel has entered into a domestic economy, the kind that is valorized uniquely by its opposition to, via the rejection of, prostitution.

This raises two important questions. First, what is it about prostitution that poses such a threat to Morel? And second, if—as we saw in the initial scene between Morel and Marcel, the musician is similar to the hero in his artistic ambitions—what is the threat to art that prostitution represents for Proust?

Reading in the Brothel: the Proustian prostitudinal economy

In spite of the fact that the world in which Marcel circulates is largely that of the upper bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, we have now seen that Proust successfully incorporates representations of working-class homosexuality and the related practice of male prostitution into *La Recherche*. Having unpacked the scene at the train station, let us now turn to the famous brothel scene in the final volume, *Le Temps retrouvé*. Once again, Marcel’s surprise at what he encounters signals to the reader that a shift in the Proustian practice of revelation is at play.

Having spent some time in a sanatorium, Marcel returns to Paris in 1916. He has a chance encounter in the street with Charlus, who, we are told, had transformed one of his properties into a military hospital. Or so Marcel had previously been led to believe. The hero then wanders into one of the few businesses on a particular street to have survived the war’s financial strain. His reading of the place is a series of corrections, following the novel’s characteristic epistemological pattern.

After observing it from afar, Marcel decides that the unusual business that he has stumbled upon must be a “lieu de rendez-vous des espions” (2219). Once he enters, ostensibly in order to satisfy his curiosity (and his thirst), he then concludes it is also the scene of a crime about to take place. In contrast with the opening scene of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*—in which Marcel, from his hiding place, overhears Charlus and Jupien’s having sex but sees nothing—from his place in an adjacent room in the hotel, the hero is able to both hear and see Charlus, chained to a bed, being whipped by a mariner-type man called Maurice. A few pages later, Marcel will learn the truth: the business he had entered is a male brothel (and sometimes hotel); it is the very hotel owned by Charlus, and managed by his former lover, Jupien.

At this point in the novel, homosexual relations should be far from unrecognizable to either Marcel or Proust’s reader. After reading the first six volumes, the reader would surely be familiar with the Narrator’s reliance on the nineteenth-century *dispositifs* used to communicate homosexuality: illness, spying, criminality.¹³ Yet the brothel scene receives significant critical attention for its overt exposure of alternative sexuality as a rather quotidian practice for many elite men.

What is perhaps more queer in this scene, I am proposing, is, in fact, its unabashed depiction of homosexuality as a form of labor, one wage-earning choice, among others. What is surprising, to the point of eluding critical commentary, is this depiction of the naked economics of the working brothel in a novel that is predominantly about the production of pure art. And yet that the building stood out as a business, in compliance with the law, is, after all, what first attracted Marcel’s curiosity, his characteristic desire to see what was happening behind the curtains: “Derrière les volets clos de chaque fenêtre la lumière tamisée à cause des ordonnances

¹³ The first time Marcel sees Charlus, he is not sure whether he is insane or a criminal. This echoes Balzac’s portrayal of Vautrin, whose homosexuality is inseparable from his protean appearance.

de police décelait pourtant un insouci complet de l'économie" (2219). Something about this place suggests a system of exchange that is simultaneously both within social norms and entirely "other" to the world outside its doors.

The "otherness" of this economy is signaled in a conversation among the brothel's employees, one that Marcel almost walks away from, which would have excluded it from his experience on account of being comprised of working-class "banalités" (2220). Almost, but not quite. The inclusion of the workers' conversation as a frame for the image of Charlus' flagellation is, in fact, of prime importance in understanding not only the scene, but the larger problem that an author faces in what can be called a Proustian prostitutional economy. Marcel hears the men talking among themselves while they wait for Jupien to return with more chains for their client. In what is an almost impressionistic scene, an embedded artist's view of laborers in a moment of leisure, the men smoke, roll dice, and talk casually about a friend. The absent man brags about being a pimp but, one worker says, he is actually in love and a dupe for giving his prostitute-lover five francs in spite of the fact that she, "une femme qui était en maison, qui gagnait plus que cinquante francs par jour," is the wealthier of the two (2221). This banal story is doubly underlined in the narrative: first, through its elevation to "cette théorie de l'amour vénal," and second by an older employee's concern that it be overheard: Marcel is there waiting, and the window is open (2222).

The young man's "théorie de l'amour vénal" essentially maintains that the path money takes in a sexual relationship exposes a one-directional expression of desire. Thus, the presence of capital in any amount—be it five or fifty francs—produces and maintains a power differential that makes it impossible to know whether sexual relations are an externally motivated form of labor or an expression of love, a genuine interior state. Just as other narrative keys are contained

in other scenes in the novel that are glimpsed and then shuttled away from the open window, this theory, or what I am calling the prostitutional economy, extends beyond the dynamics of the particular relationship between one working class man and his lover.

The continuation of the prostitutional economy depends on its deniability. Charlus must know on some level that Jupien maintains the hotel purely to satisfy the old Baron's desires; yet when Maurice abandons the fiction of his role as a hardened criminal and denies having stabbed a chatty old lady, Charlus' pleasure dissipates, leaving nothing to connect him to the young men but his money. He thus quickly pays, and leaves, but does so as someone clearly unsatisfied by his visit (2231).

Revealing the unexceptional nature of the labor that makes prostitution profitable risks exposing the fiction on which prostitution, and all other systems based on the exchangeability of seemingly universal units are built. This, of course, includes language. (That Marcel stumbles upon the brothel as a result of losing himself in a contemplation of the exchange value of narrative that *Arabian Nights* connotes is not insignificant.¹⁴) The introduction of money means, for a prostitute, that he/she is being paid to disguise the truth of his/her person in order to take on the appearance of whatever the client wants to read on his/her body. The client, however, sees the introduction of money into the relationship as a guarantee that the body made available to him will represent the truth of the individual. The prostitutional economy is thus not only the law of the world of fiction, it is also the unstable economy of metaphor, and of language itself, in which the meaning of any given sign is necessarily exterior to the object itself.

¹⁴ The exchange economy proper to the fiction-based world of prostitution meets the discourse of criminality mapped on to homosexuality as Marcel decides to find out the nature of the illuminated scene going on behind the curtained windows: "Tout cela pourtant, dans cette nuit paisible et menacée, gardait une apparence de rêve, de conte, et c'est à la fois avec une fierté de justicier et une volupté de poète que j'entrai délibérément dans l'hôtel" (2220).

On one hand, while Charlus acted with Jupien as if he were to be wise to the artifice of the role played by men like Maurice, on the other hand, he also insists in its perpetuation by relying on the mediating role of narrative. He says to Jupien, “Je ne voulais pas parler devant ce petit, qui est très gentil et fait de son mieux. Mais je ne le trouve pas assez brutal. Sa figure me plaît, mais il m’appelle crapule comme si c’était une leçon apprise” (2224). While Jupien will insist, before Charlus, that the men are hardened criminals, internally motivated to beat the aristocrat they find chained up, the Narrator will not maintain this fiction for his reader. Marcel once again overhears something surprising, this time from Maurice as he returns from Charlus’ room:

La porte se rouvrit sur le chauffeur qui était allé un instant prendre l’air. ‘Comment, c’est déjà fini? ça n’a pas été long,’ dit-il en apercevant Maurice qu’il croyait en train de frapper celui qu’on avait surnommé [...] *L’Homme enchaîné*. ‘Ce n’est pas long pour toi qui es allé prendre l’air,’ répondit Maurice [...] ‘Mais si tu étais obligé de taper à tour de bras comme moi pour cette chaleur! Si ce n’était pas les cinquante francs qu’il donne.

The drama of the brothel scene thus comes not from Marcel’s surprise at finding Charlus in a sexually charged scene (as was the case in the courtyard scene), but from the juxtaposition of a scene of private sexual desire with its fulfillment as a form of purely disinterested labor.

If the visibility of money reveals the distasteful truth that it is impossible to translate pleasure—the fulfillment of a desire for something that exceeds mere biological need—into labor costs, it gives the lie to assigning a monetary value, or even a concrete social status, to art. The source of the inequality between a prostitute and his or her client is the necessary difference between the two practices of writing and reading a given sign, be this the body (the prostitute’s property) or money (the client’s property). The brothel scene makes it apparent that a difference

in economic standing in a relationship opens the door for the incongruity of meaning awarded to the common signs connecting the “writer” and the “reader.”

In her study on a Proustian “erotics of reading,” Colleen Lamos proposes that the author’s translation of Ruskin formed his understanding of an ideal reading practice. At first, this is proposed as the ability to enter into the writer’s mind, to penetrate the body of the text. Such a practice is reversed in *La Recherche* through the depiction of Morel, on more than one occasion, as a book. It would follow that once Morel’s behavior becomes “readable” (to Charlus, to Marcel, to the reader) as that of a prostitute, his text-like body would become available for penetration at will. This should reflect the ideal of reading: a skilled interpreter of signs could actually possess Morel, could understand him for once and for all.

Of course, this will prove untenable. In the economy of prostitution in which Morel circulates, non-readability is not only an effect, but the originating condition of his prostitudinal state. The fact that Morel’s body is pure surface is what allows him to reflect the other’s desire, which he does, performing whatever role will merit him payment. The Narrator, who has less “invested” in Morel than Charlus, and seems to have less at stake in knowing what he does, compares him to a book: “Il ressemblait à un vieux livre du moyen âge, plein d’erreurs, de traditions absurdes, d’obscénités, il était extraordinairement composite. [...] En réalité, sa nature était vraiment comme un papier sur lequel on a fait tant de plis dans tous les sens qu’il est impossible de s’y retrouver” (1532-33). While generally, a composite nature is a positive aspect in the Proustian aesthetic, the errors, fragments and multiple re-workings that the Narrator sees on the surface of Morel make him into a textual space that is too cluttered and vulgar to penetrate. As a result, he affords the reader no new knowledge about himself, no way to find himself.

It is precisely at the moment of perceived availability of the prostituted body—that is, of recognizing Morel as part of an economy prostitution, which assigns a monetary value to the satisfaction of sexual desire—that *any* reading, any interpretation that goes beyond the surface, or any satisfaction becomes impossible. For example, the following describes this impenetrability one evening at the Verdurins:

[Une indépendante fierté] existait de par le privilège de la race dans *le visage si ouvert* de ce Morel au *coeur si fermé*, ce visage paré de la grâce néo-hellénique qui fleurit aux basiliques champenoises. Malgré sa fierté factice, souvent, apercevant M. de Charlus au moment où il ne s’y attendait pas, il était gêné pour le petit clan, rougissait, baissait les yeux, au ravissement du baron qui voyait là *tout un roman*. (1553)

His exterior body appears available, “ouvert,” and suggestive to one who understands the language of ancient Greek pederasty; yet his interior remains un-readable, “fermé,” at least to Charlus, who fails to see what is readable on the surface, and projects a romance novel onto it. The fulfillment of the desire for a totalizing, subjugating knowledge, of which sexual desire is but an expression, is effectively deferred, even as it is suggested, by the all-too visible surface that Morel-as-book offers to his would-be readers.

Thus, it might be argued that it is precisely because capital is involved that prostitution does not allow “reading”: money, or its equivalent, cannot bring forth meaning from under the surface. As stated earlier, at the beginning of the scene at the train station, both men were operating within an economy of prostitution: “music” for money. But immediately, Charlus’ desire exceeds the modern capitalist exchange of “non-reproductive sex against money”: he projects a marriage model, or at least a feudal model onto it: “Voilà quelqu’un par qui j’aimerais être accompagné dans mes voyages et aidé dans mes affaires. Comme il simplifierait ma vie!”

(1407). Later, he will suggest that Morel take one of his titles, or at least change his name to Charmel to reflect his connection to the “estate” provided by the Baron (), and will offer to adopt him, playing the role of (Heavenly) Father to Morel’s Tobias. What Charlus offers Morel, “his protégé,” is his “protection,” that is, the means to become more like him and ultimately, the means by which Morel would double him, completely understanding him, completely able to fulfill his desire.

The kind of relationship Charlus is looking for, and will fail to find with Morel, resembles the second model of ideal reading that Lamos considers. She shows that what Proust embraces in his reflection on Ruskin is an interpenetrability by which the reader, once emptied, allows the text to enter his mind, only to find that such a reading then allows the reader to enter the mind of the author. Charlus wants loyalty and companionship from his engagement with Morel. But sex is not excluded from this. He read in the authoritative gesture the potential that Morel might fulfill his desires to be the submissive partner in a dominant-submissive sexual relationship without having to be asked, or being compensated for it. Charlus wants the kind of reading relationship that Mlle de Vinteuil and her friend share in the scene at Montjouvain.

The kind of reciprocal relationship that leads to the fulfillment of desire by virtue of being known—which exceeds the realist model of mastery based on knowing—is only represented successfully by one couple in the book: Mlle Vinteuil and her friend. “Mais elle devina sans doute que son amie penserait qu’elle n’avait dit ces mots que pour la provoquer à lui répondre par certains autres qu’elle avait en effet le désir d’entendre, mais par discrétion elle voulait lui laisser l’initiative de prononcer” (). Mlle Vinteuil knows that her friend understands her desire and will act to fulfill it, even though it means playing a sadistic role, made desirable only in its departure from her true, good, nature. And of course, the metaphor for this exchange

of knowing the other, and having desire known, for being the voluntary subject of voyeurism, is reading (134). This reciprocal reading, and ideal sexual relationship, appears to be possible only in the absence of mediation of desire by capital.

Unfortunately, the prostitutional economy is one that reproduces an impassable barrier of difference: the failure of the prostitute to truly satisfy the client's desire points to the difference between producing signs as a kind of labor and producing signs as an expression of love. And yet it remains to be seen if this is entirely detrimental. In this section of the novel, the worker's framing conversations are far from secondary: they make evident the fact that the public commonplace of exchange is inextricable from our understanding of the most private scene of desire, vulnerability, and humiliation. This makes Marcel's visit to the male brothel an important event in the progression toward his decision to remove himself from public circulation in order to fully dedicate himself to writing.

Indeed, when Marcel speaks to Jupien about the brothel, we see that the distance between sex and writing, between brothel and publishing house, even for the high-society Proust, is—as it was for Balzac—not as wide as one might suspect. Jupien, speaking of his male brothel, says:

Sans doute, le directeur d'un établissement de ce genre, comme une grande cocotte, ne reçoit que les hommes, mais ils reçoivent des hommes marquants dans tous les genres et qui sont généralement, à situation égale, parmi les plus fins, les plus sensibles, les plus aimables de leur profession. Cette maison se transformerait vite, je vous l'assure, en un bureau d'esprit et une agence de nouvelles. (2235)

The brothel is a business that is both within bourgeois norms and exceptional to them, the labor done there may, at any moment, be transformed into the very business of professional writing.

Between Sodom and Gomorrah: Brute Genius

While the hero of the *Recherche* is a fictionalized version of the author, the intensity with which he would dedicate his life to writing was entirely autobiographical. By 1921, Marcel Proust had become, in many respects, a successful writer. And yet his correspondence reveals a persistent concern with his reputation, and his desire to be read widely and considered a literary genius of lasting impact.¹⁵ *Sodome et Gomorrhe I* had just been published, and the literary world was talking about Proust's daring subject and his erudite style. But he seemed driven to make an even wider impact. While he had recently been awarded the Prix Goncourt, Proust also tried to secure a place for himself in the Académie, and had friends advocate for him to be given the Légion d'honneur, just as, in his novel, Charlus would attempt to do for Morel. Clearly, he was torn between a desire to actively control his public image, and a fear of being seen as motivated by ambition rather than a pure dedication to art.

This dilemma is reflected directly in his approach to the object that most clearly reveals a writer's work as the product of his labor: the manuscript. On one hand, Proust insisted that his manuscripts *not* be housed in public libraries, giving readers a chance to see his creative process. On the other hand, as Pyra Wise has demonstrated in her study of the writer's correspondence, it was Proust himself, and not his editor, Gaston Gallimard, who proposed the idea of a luxury edition of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* that would contain some pages from the notebooks from which the volume was prepared for publication, along with an engraving of a portrait of him done in 1891.¹⁶ Ironically, with the sale of these limited-number luxury editions of a portion of his work, which he anticipated would sell for three- to five hundred francs, Proust

¹⁵ On this concern, see Caroline Szylowicz, "Six lettres de Marcel Proust à Louis de Robert, Gaston Gallimard et Berthe Lemarié," *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes*, vol. 2013, p. 9-21.

¹⁶ "L'édition de luxe et le manuscrit dispersé d'*A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*," *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes*, vol. 2001, p. 75-98.

circulated an image of himself and his work as a commodity, making the figure of the author of the *Recherche* visible as both an attractive young man, and as the individual whose labor produced the work of literary art.

The same year, in an essay about literary genius entitled “A propos de Baudelaire,” Proust famously claims that Morel, the prostitute-musician, is, in the *Recherche*, the link between Sodom and Gomorrah. Many readers initially interpret this as a result of Morel’s bisexuality, his ability to please women and men because he knows what each sex wants from the other (*R PP*).¹⁷ However, as I draw my study of prostitution to a close, I am proposing, instead, a connection between Proust’s circulation of his manuscript as a commodity, Marcel’s early critique of Morel for “revealing” his plan too early, and the author’s designation of the male prostitute as the character that connects Sodom and Gomorrah, two completely separate worlds. Should that title not ultimately belong to Marcel, who discovers that the paths leading in opposite directions, one to Swann’s and the other to the Guermante’s, ultimately end up meeting?

The citation that opens Proust’s volume entitled *Sodome et Gomorrhe* suggests that the two cities of the plain are divided along lines of sexual difference. However, as Elizabeth Ladenson has demonstrated, they prove to be, in both the essay and the *Recherche*, representative to two ways of knowing, only artificially separated by jealousy and desire for knowledge that excludes the mystery inherent in all true works of art. I am proposing here that we layer on to Ladenson’s reading of Sodom and Gomorrah the view of Morel as the embodiment of all that is potentially prostitutional about treating the professional artist as a mere laborer. In this way, Morel’s position as the link allows him to say that, while a lot of art may be

¹⁷ For a summary and analysis of interpretations of Proust that reduce Sodom and Gomorrah to male and female homosexuality, respectively, see the first two chapters of Elizabeth Ladenson’s *Proust’s Lesbianism*.

prostitutional, a mere imitation of others, and therefore “brutish,” continuing to resist the prostituted position that society would force upon the artist remains also the only thing capable of translating between the knowledge of a material reality and the understanding that comes from experiencing it through art.

In the essay, Proust is operating under the belief that the poets’ heroes are autobiographical. Vigny, he says, paints himself when writing about Samson, and when he says “La femme aura Gomorrhe et l’homme aura Sodome” (“La colère Samson, v. 78) he was writing out of jealousy: “c’est parce que l’amitié de Madame Dorval pour certaines femmes lui causait de la jalousie” (*ApB* 316). Proust believes Vigny was in error, temporarily blinded by jealousy, to exile Gomorrah, to separate the two sexes “en irréconciliables ennemis” (328). He contrasts him with Baudelaire, for whom the censured poems on lesbians were neither a spectacle added on to his work to sell it, nor a shameful subject to be excluded, but rather, were the most representative figure of him as a writer. When Proust then refers his reader to Morel as the one who plays the same role as Baudelaire’s narrator, he thus indicates a Morel who represents something about the creative process of the author, Proust himself. He means a Morel who, by his art, overcomes error and jealousy, not as spectacle or an effort to sell himself, nor out of shame for what he depicts. He means the Morel of the septet.

To explain what he means when he says that Baudelaire doesn’t separate the sexes the way Vigny does, Proust cites verses from “Lesbos”: in which the poem’s narrator claims to have been chosen “pour chanter le secret de ses vierges en fleurs” (v. 42). As we have seen, Morel’s music does sing to his audience of the secrets of Balbec, site of certain “jeunes filles en fleurs,” not unlike the author. While this particular knowledge appears, on the surface, to be about women, at heart it is about learning to recognize, or re-recognize something that had

previously been misread, like the “bande” that is actually comprised of individual girls, or the disjunctive nature of the paths leading to the Swann’s and the Guermantes’. This is the epistemology of Proust’s Sodom (Lamos): the error-filled, errant path that leads to the moment of understanding.

The following line of the Baudelaire poem, “Et je fus dès l’enfance admis au noir mystère” (v. 43) reverses the telling of the secret. The narrator is included in the dark “mystère” that is beyond enlightened articulation. Now, given the era, given Proust, given Baudelaire, given Freud, it is very likely that this “mystère” can be interpreted as the darkness of the female sex, the Symbolic mother, etc. However, let us imagine momentarily that this “mystère” is not about what separates the two sexes, or what happens in the dark when they get together. What if it were purely about the production of art? Then the difference between Sodom and Gomorrah would be a difference in epistemology, and not biology. The “mystère” into which the baudelairian narrator is admitted would be the “génie” beyond that which can be executed and analyzed simply as “talent.”

Genius is revealed in the production of art *purely* for the reason that it translates this “mystère” without losing any of its opacity. Only during the Vinteuil septet does Morel, like Baudelaire, expresses a transmissible knowledge that yet exceeds language. And this is the epistemology of Gomorrah. Should the artist reveal, in his work, more of his labor as a self-promoting artist than is befitting a *grand auteur*, he risks harming his image as a genius. “Ce qui est compréhensible chez Charles Morel reste profondément *mystérieux* chez l’auteur des *Fleurs du mal*” (ApB 329). What remains intriguing about Baudelaire is vulgarly laid bare about Morel. This exceeds any particular sexual ambiguity or bisexual tendencies, even if those are expressly stated for the violinist and only hinted at vis-à-vis the poet. What is altogether too apparent in

Morel, what makes him “a brute” is his prostitutional status: his “non-readability” is only too readable as the product of trying to stay emotionally separate, to gain from reflecting the other’s desire.

And yet, Morel is not imprisoned by his brutishness. During the septet, Morel’s skill as a musician astonishes the Narrator by giving the audience direct access to the mind of the composer. When he plays the Vinteuil septet, he gives without expecting anything in return. He thus succeeds at escaping, if only momentarily, the prostitutional economy. He exceeds, without negating, all the terms of the definition of prostitution cited above. He is both active, the master of his technique, and passive, expressing with his body an other’s desire. He performs both roles without a mind to profit. Since he has no idea what value the music he plays will have for each listener, he can’t project or inflate its value the way he did with the photograph of Odette. He allows art to enter him, and allows his listener to enter art: there is, through the mediation of his body, reciprocal penetration. And this penetration is not exclusive of reproduction because it allows for communion with the dead, and a perpetuation of the artist in the new, separate body of the performance. It is this sort of translation that gives his listener access to a previously unknown land inside himself, his own Gomorrah.

As such, his skill as a musician puts him on par with Mlle de Vinteuil’s friend, the one who transcribed Vinteuil’s manuscripts and made his music readable to musicians. It is not insignificant that Mlle de Vinteuil and her friend are the couple that Marcel sees through the window at Montjouvain: together, they show the hero what is necessary for the satisfaction of desire: intimate knowledge of the other without mastery over her. By closing the shutters, they keep the actual execution of the role mysterious. And yet it is Morel, and not Mlle de Vinteuil’s friend who Proust identifies as the link between Sodom and Gomorrah. Why?

They are, perhaps, too self-contained. Morel's talent as a musician is not distinct from his existence in the novel as a prostitute: "D'ailleurs, à ces oeuvres, tout autant que les relations de Mlle Vinteuil avec son amie, avaient été utiles celles du baron avec Charlie, sorte de chemin de traverse, de raccourci, grâce auquel le monde allait rejoindre ces oeuvres sans le détour, sinon d'une incompréhension qui persisterait longtemps, du moins d'une ignorance totale qui eût pu durer des années" (). The fact that Morel was dependent on Charlus for his introduction into the world suggests that, to a certain extent, it is helpful for an artist to be pushed by those who support him to define himself, to challenge himself to produce new kinds of art. Thus, an artistic performance that arose from a venal encounter outside a train traveling in the inverse direction can thus be seen as an instance of prostitution that will ultimately serve to put the reader of a work of art, say, perhaps, the *Recherche*, on the right path.

Over the course of becoming the Narrator, Marcel proves his own independence from Charlus, and the feudal, but also prostitutional economy. He successfully completes what Deleuze calls his "apprenticeship," by deciding to write for himself, not as a means of procuring support. In the aesthetic treatise that makes up the final part of *Le Temps retrouvé*, Marcel proposes a work that retains a certain "mystère," the quality that made the author of *La Recherche* admire Baudelaire's narrator. The effect of this "mystère" is two-fold. First, it must be universal enough to pose as a reflective surface on to which the specific, individual reader has the possibility of projecting her desire. Moreover, this surface must be able to offer the reader the work of finding herself, of satisfying her desire to know what is beyond the norm (connecting her to Sodom), even while it troubles this object's very knowability (connecting her to Gomorrah). Second, just as Morel's interpretation of Vinteuil's music preserves the life of the artist, so will the reader of the Narrator's imagined book.

The “mystère” that is essential to the work connecting Sodom and Gomorrah also connects the past, and that which has passed away, to the eternal present of art. By resurrecting not only the Narrator’s entire life, but that of all those around him, by making the fictional account precise enough to seem real, but separate enough from history to be eternal, the book the Narrator imagines *La Recherche* to be is “médiumnique,” in the same way as Morel’s music, in spite of the violinist’s prostituted status.

Proust’s own anxiety over the control of his image as a literary genius thus appears assuaged by Marcel’s relationship with Morel. Indeed, Marcel is more like Morel than he would like to admit. This is initially suggested by the similarity of the names, Marcel and Morel. The violinist was originally to be named Santois, which is not far from the name of the hero in his first attempt at a novel, *Jean Santeuil*. Proust changed his name to Charles Morel, Goujon speculates, around the time that Proust was determining how important a role this character would play. The similarity of the names gains more significance in light of the prostitute and the hero’s similar progression toward a career as an artist. However, if Marcel seems to insist on his superiority to the musician out of a concern that he, like Morel, might be seen in a prostitudinal position as a reader and writer, it is up to Proust’s reader to insist that he is not.

The impact on the reader, and not the status of the author, becomes the ultimate measure of the modernist work’s artistic value. There is an anxiety throughout the *Recherche* that the Narrator’s art might be just as “vulgar” as Morel. Each has been seen to pass through a stage of imitating Bergotte, and then write something told to him by Charlus, even though it may have been beyond his understanding at the time: Morel publishes the attacks on Mme de Mole; Marcel will write the story of Charles Swann and Odette, which he presumably learns from Charlus. What separates the Narrator’s pastiche of the Goncourts’ journal from Morel’s “burlesque”

imitation of Charlus is the subtle, but vital, difference of the reader's recognition. The culturally literate reader that Marcel addresses preserves the value of a work that is able to surpass and transform the author's acquired cultural education, whereas Morel could only imitate it.

Situated as he is in the wake of the century's compilation of reading prostitutes, Morel thus demonstrates for Marcel (and Proust's readers) that the difference between the published author and the circulating prostitute is less a question of exchange value or sexual deviance, than it is of cultural literacy: Morel's artistic impact is ultimately limited by his inability to move beyond what Proust's work depicts as a flawed practice of reading. Marcel's, the reader of the *Recherche* will surely conclude, will not be.

CONCLUSION: WRITING THE PROSTITUTED BODY (OF WORK)

According to controversial French feminist writer Elisabeth Badinter, prostitutes today remain problematically denied any narrative authority over what prostitution means for those who practice it. In her critique of the decision made by the *Assemblée nationale* on December 4, 2013 to criminalize the demand side of prostitution, Badinter stated: “Je regrette qu'on n'entende pas davantage les prostituées. Elles seules sont habilitées à parler. Mais quand l'une affirme: ‘*Je le fais librement*,’ on dit qu'elle ment et qu'elle couvre son proxénète.”¹ The “on” here refers to feminists who accuse the pimps profiting from prostitution of ventriloquizing through these women’s bodies. This is a rather foucauldian argument: the implication is that claiming that sex work is a choice is a prostitute’s only possible expression of subjectivity in a repressive power structure. In her critique of this, Badinter is, in turn, essentially accusing those feminists of “protectionism,” of ventriloquizing prostitutes by denying them the right to speak outside the discourse of victimization authorized by the abolitionist agenda: “Ce sont les seuls êtres humains qui n'ont pas le droit à la parole.”

Having arrived here, at the end of a project the goal of which was to examine power grabs effected by those appearing to giving voice to the marginal, I must point out that Badinter, too, is appropriating the prostitute’s language (or rather, her silence): both the negation of the words “*je le fais librement*,” and the lack of any other legitimate “parole.” She does so to supplement her own position in support of making prostitution a legal, regulated profession. And she points to their silence as proof of her authority to speak as a public figure. Thus, while Badinter may truly want to defend the right of prostitutes to speak for themselves, her statement

¹ Elisabeth Badinter, “Prostitution: ‘L’État n’a pas à légiférer sur l’activité sexuelle des individus,’” *Le Monde*. Nov. 19. 2013.

in fact has the opposite discursive effect. It reproduces the ventriloquizing gesture that she and her counterparts both sought to critique. By calling on prostitutes to speak up, Badinter implies that their words will confirm her position. She thereby erases her own privileged position, and the affirmation of her authority, behind the prostituted bodies that she would make speak. In the political and literary spheres in which Badinter seeks to circulate, inscribed by a set of authorized—even if contradicting—discourses, a prostitute’s speech only becomes legible or audible when it reproduces existing authority.

Badinter’s rhetorical move seems uncannily familiar to those made by several of nineteenth-century French authors and slang dictionary editors that we have studied in the preceeding chapters. Consider Edmond de Goncourt’s claim, for example, that “le peuple” had a right to the novel, when his erudite writing style served to clearly distinguish his superiority to the real-life *Elisas* and *Germinies*. I thus conclude that we cannot fully understand the figure of the professional, literary intellectual as both a public authority and a star-like object of public desire—the figure that came to be dominant in French society during the nineteenth-century and remained so through the twentieth century—unless we examine the gendering of the literary intellectual as male, a process that includes (but is by no means limited to) the construction of the literary profession in opposition to the feminized position of labor in public circulation represented by prostitution.

What our study here has revealed are but some of the powerful—*qua* invisible—effects of masking the production of an authority figure with the body (or voice) of a prostituted one, in the decades between Balzac to Proust. By using the prostitute’s narrative in order to defend their own right to free speech, by defining art as an exceptional commodity intended for circulation within a limited, culturally elite class of consumers, nineteenth-century bourgeois male authors

effectively aligned the distinction of high and low forms of art with gender difference. The notion that feminized, working-class representations of reality simply do not carry the same creative authority was simultaneously *produced* by the writers seeking to define the literary canon, *naturalized* by the fictions pairing the prostitute with the inferior writer, and *applied* to justify those fictions' authors' position within this new canon, and within the literary marketplace where cultural capital was converted into economic capital.

Let us now briefly return to the shifting notions of authority within the print marketplace that the figure of the prostitute communicated: let us remember that this figure was created by male writers who were in the process of defining themselves in a new political and economic structure, and defining their profession through their practices of what we only now consider to be the three general, overlapping literary style trends in the history of the long nineteenth century: romanticism, realism, and modernism.

For Balzac, at work simultaneously on *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* and *Illusions perdues* during the technological and financial revolutions that would radically alter the consumption of literature, capitalism meant the inevitable devaluation of cultural capital. The *courtisane* represented the illusion of education and style that could mask the absence of authentic inner nobility, or genius. Esther and Lucien are both the true novelist's illegitimate "other," circulating on the power of sexual and narrative desire alone, rather than the authority of a disinterested commitment to art. Similarly, in Dumas *fils*' début novel, the anxiety surrounding the loss of control of financial capital (personal property) is translated into the discourse of public hygiene. As liquid assets—the display of which was previously seen as dirty, immoral and base—were gradually becoming the sign of cultural authority, *La Dame aux camélias* renders the literate *courtisane* and her passé Romantic lover subject to the narrator's command over the

circulation of books, and Duval *père*'s command over the circulation of property and women. The representation of the source of contagion—physical and commercial desire—becomes a way to distinguish the legitimate valuation of genuine intellectual property (produced by men such as l'Abbé Prévost and Alexandre Dumas *fils*) from the desire-driven inflation of books as collector's items, as empty signs of cultural capital.

The slang dictionaries produced under the Second Empire, such as Delvau's 1866 *Dictionnaire de la langue verte*, reflects the literary world's turn to a scientific discourse at the height of the realist movement. Medical and judicial authority over prostitutes, and linguistic authority over the language they metonymically represented, served the interest of mastering the social uncertainty that resulted from the increasingly democratic access to education and wealth. Dictionary authors adopted a more or less legitimate posture of scientific authority as a style in an effort to create the effect of social distance between the real members of the working class and the artists who deigned study them (and re-present their language). By looking at a collection of the century's dictionaries, which were consistently produced as an object of bourgeois entertainment, we saw how this authority was first an effect and then later a source of the commodification of the anxiety-provoking working-class other as spectacle.

In light of this spectacle, it becomes difficult to interpret the Naturalists' depiction of common brothel workers as exclusively sympathetic to the injustices facing members of the working-class. Instead, we see a similar conscious performance of both scientific discourse and vulgar language as a means of aestheticizing an utterly unexceptional, commercialized body in the novels by the aristocratic Edmond de Goncourt, the future decadent J.-K. Huysmans, and even the more socially engaged Emile Zola. The use of the prostitute's story to bring public attention to the aesthetic superiority of the Naturalist author and his ideal reader solidly positions

the *romans de la prostitution* as conscious reactions to the rapid expansion of the literary marketplace as rising literacy rates and declining book prices made novels an utterly unexceptional product. Their subjection of content to style marks the shift toward modernism as a product of anxieties surrounding post-revolutionary loss of class hierarchy.

By the end of the First World War, which brought the long nineteenth century to a close, the modernist author Marcel Proust introduces into the novel itself the author's awareness that style—and not content—had officially become the sign of a great work of art. He effectively queers the trope of the prostituted artist through the character of Charles Morel, a musician and male prostitute, by eliminating the formerly stable marker of difference (gender) that helped distinguish the model of cultural illiteracy from the novel's reader. Proust thereby introduces the world of the *roman montmartrois* into the field of high art, extending the purvey of the modern novel as genre beyond the realm of the culturally “unacceptable” into that of what is largely invisible from a perspective situated exclusively within the dominant, heteronormative bourgeois value system. If the Naturalists imagined an ideal elite reader who could potentially rescue the modern author from commodification by recognizing a work of art by the bourgeoisie's distaste for its subject, Proust's juxtaposition of Morel with the hero, Marcel, once again makes the cultural value of the work of art dependent on the artist. However, unlike the preexisting nobility that guaranteed the place of the artist for Balzac, Proust's artist distinguishes himself from the prostituted one by his ability to legitimately accumulate cultural capital by learning from (rather than seeking to profit from) rereading the signs offered by one's personal experience.

Thus, in the representations of prostitution produced at both ends of the century, a command of cultural capital—the ability to interpret and control the means of cultural reproductions—stands as the constant sign of the social elite and, moreover, proves as the one

stable element able to resist the degradation of capitalist exchange. What happens over the course of a century's worth of depictions of selling one's self, in the novels published in the years from Balzac to Proust, traces the changes in the relationship between literature and capitalism, at least from the point of view of dominant bourgeois masculinity. In arguing this, I do not mean to remove gender or class from the focus of studies of representations of prostitution. To the contrary, I believe that these representations offer a point of entry into a broader study of exactly how the means of cultural reproduction are kept within the control of a small dominant elite, in spite of (and undermining the effect of) social movement outside the sphere of aesthetic representation.

The voice of this elite's "other" is admittedly lacking in this dissertation, be this in the form of writing done by actual prostitutes or women writers making a place for themselves in a market that had been so effectively gendered masculine. While historians Laure Adler and Gabrielle Houbre both document the scarcity of accounts of prostitution from the perspective of the women themselves, such documents do exist. Additionally, some *courtisanes* such as Mme de Sabatier and Alice Regnault became central figures in literary circles and others, like la Mogador (Céleste Vénard, a.k.a. la Comtesse de Chabrillon) were even published authors. And I have left out perhaps the less-heard half of a two-sided conversation by failing to include women authors like George Sand, Gyp, Rachilde, and Colette who equally engaged the question of what it meant to be a public literary figure and a woman. However, it was a conscious decision to do so, since my question was about how representations of prostitution functioned as a metaphor in the process of defining art as the exclusive domain of a dominant male elite, the power of which would be naturalized and eternalized by the time Bourdieu came upon "distinction" as a new discovery.

Today, almost a century has passed since readers first encountered Charlie Morel, the artistic prostitute and Proustian rewriting of Balzac's prostituted artist, Lucien de Rubempré. What, then, has become of the metaphor? Micheal Lucy argues in *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide and Proust* (2006), modernism witnessed a shift in the social authority with which one could speak about certain issues—including that of belonging to groups marginalized on the basis of exceeding heteronormativity. Given this, could writing *about* prostitution retain the distance from real sex work necessary to maintain its metaphorical power? One might expect the rhetorical device to have broken down over the course of the twentieth century as the control of literary representation of prostitution seemed to move out of the hands of clients in the publishing industry, and into those of the prostitutes themselves: “les intéressé(e)s prennent enfin la plume et livrent leur propre version,” writes journalist Macha Séry in a brief survey of the artistic representation of prostitution through the ages.²

Indeed, Jean Genet includes an account of his experience as a prostitute in 1932 in his work blending fiction and autobiography, *Le journal d'un voleur* (1949). In a similar vein, a more recent account of the prostitute-turned-writer can be found in *Putain* (2001), a semi-autobiographical work by Canadian writer Nelly Arcane (a pseudonym) that is based on the author's experience as an escort. And yet these were both marketed as “novels.” Together with many of the other autobiographically-based fictions and autofictions published in the years between them, *Le journal d'un voleur* and *Putain* suggest that the literary world has, in fact, seen little decline in the use of the prostituted figure to ventriloquize concerns that are predominantly

² “La prostitution à travers les arts : la littérature,” *LeMonde.fr* December 3, 2013. Accessed April 6, 2016. http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2013/12/03/la-prostitution-a-travers-les-arts-la-litterature-chapitre-5_3524765_3260.html

aesthetic in nature, and the business (figuratively and literally) of writers whose education allies them soundly with a privileged, dominant class.³

Consider, for example, the first-person prostitute's narrative entitled *La Vie d'une prostituée* (1948). This work, attributed to a writer known simply as "Marie-Thérèse," offers the reader an inside view of the life of a woman who supported herself as a prostitute during the Second World War. However, the novel is intimately connected to the literary circle surrounding philosopher and literary giant Jean-Paul Sartre. Even at the time of its initial publication in Sartre's journal, *Les Temps modernes* (issue 27, December 1947), *La Vie d'une prostituée* was considered to be the work of a writer in the existentialist's circle. (A translation of it would appear in the United States in 1966, with a forward by Simone de Beauvoir, however she denied authorship of it.)

Sartre's own interest in the figure of the prostitute as an embodiment of a certain powerlessness over the potential effects of human liberty is evident in his 1946 play about the rape of an American prostitute, *La P... respectueuse*. In his essay *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur* (also published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1947), Sartre writes that one of the main traits of the modern writer is his disgust for the exchangeability of the sign, which he had inherited from the nineteenth-century novelists.⁴ This disgust for the innate meaninglessness of signs echoes that of

³ Séry's list of examples supposedly supporting her claim that depictions of prostitution deemed "literary" came to be written by prostitutes themselves in the twentieth century actually undermines her argument that the "intéressé(e)s" became writers. Most of the authors in the list had already embarked on a path toward a literary career at the time of their experience with prostitution. "Le XXe siècle sera celui de l'autofiction et du récit d'inspiration autobiographique : *Vie d'une prostituée* (1947) de Marie-Thérèse, *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* (1948) et *Le journal d'un voleur* (1949) de Jean Genet, *Prostitution* (1975) de Pierre Guyotat, *Moi Christiane F, 13 ans, droguée, prostituée* (1983), *Les aventures singulières* (1983) d'Hervé Guibert, *Les Chiennes savantes* (1996) de Virginie Despentes, *L'Aveu différé* (1997) de Jacques Borel, *Putain* (2001) de Nelly Arcan, *Le noir est une couleur* (1974) et *Carnet de bal d'une courtisane* de Grisélidis Réal" (op. cit.). Séry also includes *Plateforme* (2005) by Michel Houellebecq and *Vingt-trois prostituées* (1999) by Canadian Chester Brown, even though these novels demonstrate a definitive return to male writers producing narratives about female prostitutes.

⁴ This argument appears in the essay, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?*, which appears, in parts, in *Les Temps moderne* in 1947, the same year as *La Vie d'une prostituée*.

the prostitute for her the emptiness of her gestures, a disgust that Huysmans and Goncourt had attributed to Marthe and Elisa. The narrator of *La Vie d'une prostituée* writes, similarly, “J'avais pris horreur de ce métier et j'étais dégoûtée de tous ces cochons qu'il faut sucer, branler, à qui il faut faire tant de trucs pour qu'ils jouissent” (qtd. in Séry).

Even as a literary object, *La Vie d'une prostituée* seems to play with aspects of bibliophilia and the commodification of the author's labor that had occupied nineteenth-century authors of *romans de la prostitution* as well as Proust (aspects that I have discussed in Chapters Four and Five). The narrative by “Marie-Thérèse” published in *Les Temps modernes* appeared in an expanded version in 1948: the book, published clandestinely, in a small print-run of 1550 copies, featured “as a frontispiece, a facsimile of a page of the original handwritten manuscript.”⁵ It was reissued and censored at least six times in the decades following its initial publication. Whether the inclusion of the manuscript constitutes a fetishizing of the author, and whether the publication practices sought censorship in an effort to increase desirability (as I have proposed in the case of Proust and Huysmans) are questions for another study. However what is clear in the mystery surrounding the publication of *La Vie d'une prostituée* is that as long as an author's body of work circulates in a physical form, beyond the author's control, there seems to be a concern with the tension between authenticity and the ability (or desire) to circulate publicly.

This tension has clearly continued to correlate publication with received ideas about prostitution, even as the figure of the public intellectual appears to have lost the star-like aura enjoyed by writers like Sartre, and even as the figure of the prostitute moved from the margins of French society to the margins of a global economy. It is possible to see in controversial Michel Houellebecq's defense of sexual tourism a certain amount of identification between his own

⁵ This description is from the article “*Vie d'une prostituée*” by Patrick Kearney in *The Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, vol I, Ed. Melissa Hope Ditmore. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006. (p. 524 – 525)

work as an author and the Thai prostitutes he depicted in his novel *Plateforme* (2001). In a 2010 interview published in *The Paris Review*, the interviewer asks him what he thinks about prostitution. He replies, “I’m all for prostitution. [...] Because everybody wins. It doesn’t interest me personally, but I think it’s a good thing. A lot of British and Americans pay for it. They’re happy. The girls are happy. They make a lot of money.” The interviewer tries to bring up the victimization of such women, but Houellebecq dismisses her point curtly. Permit me to reach into the autobiographical for an explanation. Elsewhere in the interview, Houellebecq discusses his relationship to the now-familiar tension between his desire for canonization and his distaste for venality. He places himself in the lineage of realist writers like Balzac, then explains that he prefers to not have to actively promote his work. He thus admits to relishing the media attention he gained from the critical outrage at his depictions of sex in *Particules élémentaires* (1996) because it resulted in sales that earned him enough money to quit working as a computer programmer and write full time.

In light of this, it may seem that, of all the writers we have considered here, Houellebecq may, in fact, represent a culminating point in the practice of using representations of prostitution to “hack” the system of today’s literary marketplace in the interest of his own self-promotion. But only time will tell if his work will survive to see the transformation of his venality (not to mention his misogyny and racism) into a trace of literary genius. If, that is, literary scholars are able to survive the corporitization of the intellectual sphere.

The use of references to prostitution to communicate disgust for the way capitalism sees to contaminate intellectual work is not restricted to nineteenth-century Paris. As I said in the Introduction, comparing the devaluing of one’s intellectual labor to the prostitution of one’s body persists in the public imagination, in the United States as well as in France. Richard Vedder,

economics professor at The Ohio State University (and University of Illinois alum), demonstrated this when he referred to universities as “intellectual prostitutes” for their willingness to “trade their principles for cash” (2).⁶ I would propose that Vedder’s identification as an economist, and as a man, contributed to his decision to use this metaphor. Such a comparison for humanities scholar would be even more uncomfortable, given the gendering of fields of study within academia that has taken place in the relatively short period of time that women have been admitted into the profession. Just as the gendering of the literary profession during the nineteenth century correlated with the rise of the novel to a position of economic prominence, a similar gendering, in reverse, is evident in the American academe today. The perceived value of the various kinds of intellectual work complicates Vedder’s condemnation of “intellectual prostitutes.” The humanities have become feminized, while STEM fields remain masculinized, and the disparity of economic capital that the state and the university allot to support research and education in each field appears correlated to this feminization. *Plus ça change...*

⁶ “Academic Prostitution, California Style,” op. cit. in the Introduction.

EPILOGUE: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY *MAISON CLOSE* ON THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY OPEN
MARKET

Over the past decade France has seen a sudden resurgence of popular interest in the figure of the nineteenth-century Parisian prostitute. In September 2015, the Musée d'Orsay opened the "first major show" of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century paintings, photographs, documents, and films depicting the world of prostitution, across the social spectrum. The public to whom the museum, and its extensive website, offers access to these representations is similarly diverse. The images of life in the *maison close* were indeed circulating, once again, on an open market... now, global in scale.¹ The curators surely counted on the show's appeal to the masses, given the international public's growing fascination with this marginalized figure who was, ironically, so central to the nineteenth-century French collective imagination. Responses to the show constitute a microcosm of the various approaches to representing prostitution as well as the intersection of the issues involved in doing so that we have considered here: art, labor, censorship, social reality and the power of collective fantasy. The title of one review romanticizes the exhibit, focusing its reader on the *demi-monde*²; another takes a more naturalist spin, focusing on prostitution as a profession.³ Yet another traces the

¹ Sarah Moroz, a journalist for the New York Times digital offshoot *Women in the World* documents the incongruity between what the exhibit reveals and her expectation (one probably common to many Americans) that prostitution constitutes a hidden, seedy underworld: "What is often imagined as some seething underbelly was actually an extremely visible quotidian reality, threaded into the fabric of society across all social strata." See the full review, "New exhibit explores the splendor and misery of the world's oldest profession: Prostitution as a muse at the Musée d'Orsay," in *Women in the World*, Sept. 23, 2015. <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/09/23/new-exhibit-explores-the-splendor-and-misery-of-the-worlds-oldest-profession/> Accessed on Nov. 8, 2015.

² Willsher, Kim, "Cocottes, courtesans and sex in the city: Paris celebrates art of the demi-monde," *The Guardian* online edition, Sept. 19, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/sep/19/musee-orsay-prostitution-paris-exhibition-splendour-and-misery> Accessed Nov. 8, 2015.

writing about prostitutes—the *pornei-graphy* of the works—back on to the “author” of the exhibit, suggesting that the museum’s president was consciously aware of the commercial value in bringing together works of art considered scandalous in nature.⁴

Indeed, by juxtaposing representations of sexually available women produced for private consumption with works by canonical artists, the exhibit simultaneously breaks down and reinscribes the division between high art and pornography that nineteenth-century editors, authors and state censors wished to see applied to the slang dictionaries and works of literature discussed in the preceding chapters of this dissertation. Not only does the website issue the following warning to potential visitors, in bold, “Please note that some of the pieces presented in the exhibition may be shocking to some visitors (particularly children).”⁵ The layout of the exhibit itself includes two “secret” rooms that are off-limits to minors in attendance due to the categorization of the materials displayed—some of the photographs and early films—as explicitly pornographic.

However, in my personal experience as the mother of a three-year old and a scholar whose books often have images of prostitutes on the front, children are far more comfortable with the sight of nudity than the adults who have internalized the messages about—and conveyed

³ Sciolino, Elaine, “‘Splendor and Misery: Images of Prostitution,’ Captures a Profession in Paris Through Artists’ Eyes,” *The New York Times Online Edition*, Sept. 21, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/22/arts/design/splendor-and-misery-images-of-prostitution-captures-a-profession-in-paris-through-artists-eyes.html> Accessed on Nov. 8, 2015.

⁴ In a review of the show for Forbes online, Cecilia Rodriguez writes, “Great Expectations surround the exhibition *Splendor and Misery: Pictures of Prostitution, 1850 -1910* at the Musée d’Orsay [...] First, because of the bold and decadent nature of the theme and the works exhibited. It’s another “Shocking Exhibition” from Guy Cogeval, the museum’s president who was also behind a male nude show two years ago that was a blockbuster – just as this one may well be.” *Forbes/Lifestyle*, Sept. 23, 2015. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ceciliarodriguez/2015/09/23/when-bordello-meets-museum-a-paris-exhibit-on-prostitution-guaranteed-to-shock-visitors-picasso-musee-dorsay-degas-manet-lautrec/> Accessed on Nov. 8, 2015.

⁵ http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay/article/splendeurs-et-miseres-42671.html?tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=254&cHash=b5973a8b6d Accessed on Nov. 8, 2015.

by—the public exposure of a more or less unclothed female body. As I have demonstrated through my close readings of the works selected for this project, representations of prostitution are rarely exclusively (if at all) about sex or those having it. I suspect that there is something else at play in the current public fascination with nineteenth-century Parisian prostitution, in the public woman at the symbolic heart of European culture during the rise of modern consumer capitalism.

Scholarly attention to the fictional representations as well as the elusive experience of the real women (and men) whose lives inspired them has remained somewhat constant in France since the late 1970s. Historian Alain Corbin's foundational work, *Les Filles de noce* was first published in 1979, and has been rereleased every decade since. However, the choice of Zola's *Nana* as one of the texts for the 2009 *concours d'agrégation* in literature is evidence of the subject's importance in a slightly broader public imagination. This choice followed the publication of the anthology by the distinguished Robert Laffont press, *Un Joli monde, romans de la prostitution* (2008), and that of *Le livre des courtisanes: Archives secrètes de la police de mœurs, 1861-1876* (2006), edited by Gabrielle Houbre. The marketability of these two books in the popular domain is evidence of an increased fascination with the representation of “the golden age of prostitution” in both fiction and the archive.

In the years immediately following these admittedly more scholarly products, two period dramas appeared, the popular appeal of which it would be impossible to deny: a film and a mini-series came out, both offering twenty-first century depictions of the “behind the scenes” life of the women living and working in upscale brothels in the first few decades of the Third Republic. Filmmaker Bertrand Bonello had started working on his film, *L'Apollonide, souvenirs d'une maison close* (2011) in 2007, after discovering historian Laure Adler's study *La vie quotidienne*

dans les maisons closes, 1830-1930 (first published in 1990, and currently in its sixth edition).

L'Apollonide caught the attention of critics at Cannes: it received eight nominations for César awards. Television producer Jacques Ouaniche's series, *Maison Close* had a record-setting average of one million viewers when season one first aired on Canal+ in 2010.

It is undeniable that this return to the nineteenth-century imaginary—and the imaginary return to the nineteenth century—coincided with renewed political attention to sex work in an increasingly global economy. In 2010, deputy Chantal Brunel proposed a law to reopen the *maisons closes*, which had been illegal since 1946, following the passing of the Marthe Richard law. However, the conservative legislation aiming to criminalize solicitation in 2003 was part of a series of laws aimed primarily at reducing the *visibility* of the poor and disenfranchised. Other parts of the bill—written by a certain Nicolas Sarkozy, who was, at that time, Interior Minister—criminalized organized systems of beggars as well as “aggressive” begging, established a two-month prison sentence as a penalty for youths caught loitering in the stairwells or entrances of apartment blocks, and made it a punishable offense to insult the French flag or boo the national anthem. Women making a living as sex workers were but one face of a larger problem facing the conservative government officials who viewed increasing European and global migration as a threat to the already-overextended French economy, job market, and health care system. While the practice of prostitution had become radically different, the figure of the prostitute seems to have continued to function as the embodiment of collective social anxieties. But what exactly are these today? Do they extend, as before, past the threat of sexually transgressive bodies?

In her review of the Musée d'Orsay show, American ex-pat journalist Sarah Moroz offers her own reading of the threats embodied in two paintings: Jean Béraud's *La Proposition* (The Proposition, 1885) and Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret's *La Blanchisseuse* (The Laundress, 1880).

Having opened her article by framing the show in Amnesty International's endorsement of "decriminalizing the global sex trade" in order to better "protect the women whose line of work it is," she views the paintings with a sympathy for the women depicted that maps a certain disgust for their clients onto the canvases.⁶ She describes the gazes of the embedded male viewers as "predatory," "leering," and "so sharply invasive as to be bone chilling." While I am not saying that she is misreading the individual works, the language she uses suggests a level of identification with the women in the paintings that—in combination with her overall assessment of the exhibit as showing the quotidian nature of such prostitutional exchanges—is perhaps excessive, if not unfounded.

I cannot help but feel that Moroz, like the authors whom I have discussed in this dissertation, sees the working-class prostitute as somehow representative of her own social position as a contemporary female freelance writer. She says, "Though the depictions of these women in paintings never exude outright desperation, their equanimity feels forced. [...] One can only imagine the daily presumptions and violations of civil decency women had to wrestle with, simply by virtue of being women in the public sphere." Perhaps, however, it is only from my own standpoint as a feminist French scholar that those last few words, "women in the public sphere," link this Paris-based journalist's reading of images of prostitution to the history of gendering public written discourse.⁷

Moroz would not be alone in mapping the twenty-first-century writer's experience onto the figure of the nineteenth-century prostitute. The press kit accompanying the film,

⁶ "New exhibit..." Op. cit.

⁷ Moroz's use of the phrase may not even be consciously evoking Jürgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere as the locus of power over social and political discourse, and control of the representational systems as support for this power; it is all the more difficult to imagine that she could be alluding to the classic of feminist French cultural studies in the U.S., historian Joan Landes' *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, Cornell: Cornell UP, 1988.

L'Apollonide, includes a conversation between the director, Bertrand Bonello, and Laure Adler. Bonello admits that “In truth, one could say that the character played by Noémie Lvovsky is me, the director, directing this brothel, she designs her sets, she asks the prefect for help the way I ask the CNC for money... and maybe you could consider that her client is my audience...”⁸ Of course, his comment seems to fall in line with a cinematic tradition that relates the actress to the prostitute, her desiring audience to the client, and the film maker to the one behind the scenes, pimping her out. However, it is significant that not only does he identify with the brothel madam, but that the character is played by Noémie Lvovsky, a screen-writer and film maker in her own right. Furthermore, Bonello articulates the reason for his identification with a female role by relating to his position of financial dependence on the French state: funding from the Centre nationale de cinématographie and the Ile-de-France region made up almost a third of the film’s budget. Clearly, the metaphor of prostitution for artistic production continues to resonate with artists who find in the referent a world with a complex economic hierarchy strikingly similar to the one around them.

In fact, if both Moroz’s and Bonello’s views of nineteenth-century prostitution transform it into a lens through which they inspect their own professions, one final close reading will demonstrate the extent to which the contemporary fascination with the subject may very well be functioning as an outlet for a much more broadly-felt anxiety about the global labor market in general. That the introductory sequence to the eight episodes of the first season of *Maison close* had an aesthetic and a soundtrack uncannily suggestive of the *Mad Men* opening sequence is one clue. But another trace of the show’s presentation of itself to its public, one more exclusive to the digital turn, offers a better one.

⁸ Adler, Laure, “Conversation Between Bertrand Bonello and Laure Adler,” *L'Apollonide Press Book*, Paris: Rendez-vous Press, April 2011. Available online at <http://www.festival-cannes.com/assets/Image/Direct/039460.pdf> Accessed on Nov. 8, 2015.

When *Maison close* debuted in 2010, the Canal+ server hosted a website giving detailed information about the show and its cast, including airing dates, stills from each episode, and behind-the-scenes interviews. The site originally had an elaborate introductory sequence, programmed in Flash (and unfortunately no longer enabled), that inadvertently demonstrated the social anxiety that made this show appeal to such a wide audience. The highly digitized “camera” occupied a first-person point of view that began with a glimpse of the brothel madam—a realistically animated version of the actress in the show—scrutinizing the viewer through an external door’s peep hole; the entire door then opens and the viewer is escorted into the lobby of the *Paradis*, a fictional upscale brothel in 1871 Paris. The camera’s gaze is that of a male client, panning a room full of alluring women who make eye contact with the viewer and pose seductively. Then, just as it looks as though the viewer is about to climb the main staircase, the camera operates a physically impossible move, flying straight up to the second floor, and spinning in mid-air to move onto the balcony where we meet the stern gaze of the brothel madam a second time. This time, the madam speaks to the viewer as if he/she was one of the brothel residents. The camera then takes the viewer through yet another door, behind which we see the same array of women, now in a state of repose, lacking the elegant costumes they had been wearing only moments before.

This virtual introduction effectively communicates the “upstairs, downstairs” drama that the show’s producers wanted to market, but the sex-change effected by the fly-up (making the viewer transform from brothel client to a brothel resident) highlights the role that technology plays in creating the illusion of sexual neutrality—or rather, ambiguity—in the modern consumer of digital media. In both of the positions occupied sequentially by the camera, the viewer’s gaze is returned, uncomfortably, by its object: a subject commodified by another’s sexual or

commercial desire. This object-subject confronts the desire to see with an expression critical of the viewer's very presence. In the first half of the introductory sequence, the masculine gaze of masterful enjoyment of a spectacle is destabilized by the evaluating look of the house madam, and then the look of each woman who reduces the viewer to a means of personal gain. In the second half, the madam again offers a critical expression to the viewer who must then confront the reality that his/her role in the house is that of an employee (or servant), rather than a client: the criteria of the madam's evaluation thus shift from detecting the ability to spend money to the ability to make money. All this to say that the show itself is eerily aware of its audience's modern anxiety surrounding the unstable nature of relationship between consumers, owners and producers in today's global labor market. For those watching, the show offers an equally uncomfortable view of the role we all play today as both laborers deprived of choice by the job market of an economy in perpetual crisis, and consumers of products that disguise oppressive, underpaid forced labor under the glittering allure of the fashion industry, among others.

And this uncomfortable fascination and fascinating discomfort is what unites the "low" art of serialized television, the "high" art housed in the Musée d'Orsay, and the texts I have examined in this dissertation. I maintain that the current interest in the figure of the nineteenth-century Parisian prostitute is partly due to the fact that representations of these figures speak to our European/American contemporary anxieties related to not being able to say no to job offers in the current era of recession, unequal distribution of wealth, and outsourcing. However, it is also partly due to the fact that we live in a world dependent on the masking of feminized labor. This labor is masked, at times, in the legitimacy of commercial desire; at other times, it is hidden by the persistent taboo of unabashedly looking at, or talking about, sex. In yet another review of the Musée d'Orsay exhibit, an article entitled "Tourists Love Musée d'Orsay's 'Orgasmic'

Prostitution Exhibition,” the critic seems unsure who is more “juvenile”: the curators or the museum-goer whose comment about the show he ironically reproduces in his own title.⁹

It is therefore of note that when critics of the exhibition, or modern screenwriters, or advocates of either regulatory or abolitionist legislation, focus the public’s attention on the sexuality that makes up the scandalous surface of the figures of the prostitute, they are continuing to fetishize the trope, thereby repeating the same reality-effacing violence of nineteenth-century realisms. I believe that this may be at least partly because so many of us are—like the bourgeois critics whose blindness to the truth about their own venality was the target of the Naturalist writers’ criticism—unwilling to part with the benefits of the colonizing, prostitutional subjection of a feminized labor force on which our first-world contemporary society is built.

We too may choose to focus on the dazzling surface of the *courtisane*, or the redemptive love story, in order to avoid seeing how similar the current desire to control illegal migrant labor (in Europe and the US) is to the nineteenth century’s desire to regulate prostitutes. And by migrant labor, I mean both global sex trafficking both also the illegal practices from which fashion and service industries profit. We may want even less to confront the inevitability of the failure of First World economies to maintain control over the global flow of marginalized bodies: bodies that fall between stable categories of disciplined laborers and undisciplined threats to social order. An inevitability that is traced in the repeated failure of the slang dictionaries as well as the *Bureau de mœurs*.

⁹ Brian Boucher seems to agree with other critics, particularly Harry Bellet of *Le Monde*, who accuse the museum of caring more about box office numbers than insightful curation, implying that this exhibit’s appeal was to the lowest common denominator in the museum-going public, one who would find “orgasmic” a humorous descriptor for an art show featuring representations of prostitutes. *ArtNet News* online, Oct. 16, 2015. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/prostitution-exhibition-musee-orsay-341147> Accessed on Nov. 8, 2015.

Fictionalized prostitution will continue to fascinate us, as it did the writers navigating the newly capitalist nineteenth-century literary marketplace. In the face of representations of prostitutes, we see collapsed the distance between our identification with the subject as a self, and our fear of her as a commodified other. On one hand, it thus speaks to us in our own position as “subject” to a global economy dominated by recession and uncertainty. And yet, on the other, the collapse of difference between ourselves and the prostitute’s clients and representors makes it impossible to look away from a reality that we would rather deny: the extent to which the satisfaction of our first-world commodified desires is entirely dependent on our nations’ subjugation of a feminized working-class (international) other.

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